

From the Age of the Guru to the Age of the Friend

Recently a guru admitted to me, “You know, when I stopped believing that I was enlightened and others weren’t, all the fun went out of giving satsang!”

The age of the guru is over. This is the age of the friend. The message of self-knowledge and liberation is outstripping any guru’s ability to contain it. People have been discovering that the message is independent of the messenger. The message has become detached from its older, exclusivistic, privileged stage settings. No longer must it travel down from a hierarchy. These days the message of liberation spreads horizontally from person to person. It moves more like an ocean than a waterfall. It grows more like a rhizome than an oak tree.

Of course there are still gurus. There will be gurus as long as there are friends. There will always be some gurus able to serve as wonderful teachers and inspiring examples. But these days the **friend** is providing more and more of the same services. The friend is spreading the message of self-knowledge, opening hearts with lovingkindness, and inspiring others with enthusiasm.

Morphing the guru model

The turn from the guru to the friend is not just a matter of inspiration; it’s also a matter of information. We’ve got freer access to what was formerly more selective and closed. The message of self-knowledge has reached interested parties wherever there’s communication. And this communication no longer needs to flow through the narrow-band guru-frequency, but has overflowed and become broadband.

This has caused the guru model itself to morph into something more democratic and decentralized. There are more teachers with less charisma. In California, supply exceeds demand to the point where a student can choose from any number of retreats on a given weekend. Retreat leaders have had to lower their fees to keep competitive. And then during the following week, the students e-mail the teachings out to all their friends, who then tell others.

The connotations of the term “guru” are changing. Traditionally this Sanskrit word has been interpreted to mean dispeller (gu) of darkness (ru). It was understood primarily in personal terms, and the guru was worshipped as an incarnation of God — a sacred, exclusive conduit to self-realization. These days, the metaphor has gone stale. No longer do people accept the image that they’re in darkness until assisted by a purportedly perfected human being. In spiritual circles, the “guru” word is more and more taken to point to the seeker’s own

innermost self.

Exclusivity not politically correct

No longer can people believe that liberation speaks only Tibetan, or that the world was created from holy Sanskrit syllables. People are saying, “If it can’t be said in my language, then it isn’t so universal after all.” Even as recently as thirty years ago, seekers of self-awareness had to trek to India or the Himalayas to see someone who could impart a message of liberation. These days there are many routes: Barnes & Noble, Borders, Amazon, Yahoo, Google, mobile phones and BlackBerries. Teachings that used to be limited to a select few are now being joyously shared between friends in any language. Even decades ago, you had to go to ashrams or temples and maybe wait three days before the keepers would let you enter. Now the same message can be found in coffee shops, living rooms, cyber chat-rooms and even prisons. A few of the younger gurus are beginning to adapt their teachings to this new democratic tone. They’ve backed off from the stance of exclusivity and have come closer to celebrating friendship and enlightened ordinariness. And other gurus are digging in their heels and sticking to the old story.

Warts and information

Public figures are now commonplace. We know more about more people. We see their warts and indiscretions. This is inevitable in today’s infoculture where bloggers and paparazzi themselves can get famous. The older guru model can’t survive this much information. According to the older and exalted versions of the guru model, the guru is a unique and perhaps perfected example of humanity. Maybe divinity in temporary human clothing. Some have even said that the guru is beyond God. But as information increases, it becomes much harder for this image to survive. High perfection becomes low comedy with each new revelation of vegetarian gurus caught eating chiliburgers, celibate gurus discovered having affairs with their PR chiefs, or miracle-wielding gurus photographed with trinkets in the folds of their sleeves.

Information on gurus abounds in ways that were unthinkable a while ago. There’s up-close and personal information in books such as [Feet of Clay](#), [Mother of God](#), or [Enlightenment Blues](#). There are websites such as Jerry Katz’s famous [Nonduality.com](#), which has helped deconstruct the older guru model by its sheer breadth of expression, and by listing so many gurus, including literary and movie characters. Then there’s [Sarlot’s Guru Ratings](#) pages, which freely give subjective and personal scores to gurus, along with their anti-sites where possible. There’s Jody Radzik, who for years has been a fly in the ointment, reminding people that a guru’s image of perfection is created by the student’s idealizations. Recently Jody has come up with [guruphilac.org](#), an newsy info blog with guru refugee-sites and other poop and scoop that

makes it much harder to idealize the guru.

But what about enlightenment by transmission?

But it's not always about the message. Another angle to the guru model is the notion of *enlightenment by transmission* (EBT). In the EBT model, the special thing is the guru's very presence. It has nothing to do with information or the words spoken, but everything to do with the special state the guru is thought to be in. The evidence for this state is thought to be the certain glow and energetic vibrancy which can be felt by devotees in the presence of the guru, especially in large group meetings. According to the EBT model, if the disciple gets physically, emotionally or psychically close to the guru, this state can be transmitted from the guru to the disciple. The transmission can be instantaneous or progressive over years. But thinking is starting to change on this aspect as well.

People are asking about the relations between this energy and enlightenment. "Is this energy really what constitutes enlightenment, or is enlightenment something else altogether?" "If this energy **can** be transmitted, then why does the blissful feeling dissipate in me and not remain?" "Why do I feel the same way now in the presence of my guru that I felt many years ago at a Bruce Springsteen concert?" "After spending three decades in the guru's presence, why don't I possess this energy so that I can then go on to transmit it to someone else?" "What is the relation between me and the energy? Whose energy is it? Am I the energy or the experiencer of the energy?"

In the West since the 60's and the Vietnam phenomenon, there's less reliance on authority, lower patience for rigid hierarchies, and diminished credulity towards metanarratives (as Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote in **The Postmodern Condition**.) Causal explanations tend to be more rhizomatic and less arboreal – we don't look as much for single causes, we look more for interactive scenarios and networks of relations.

This kind of orientation has changed how people respond to the EBT model as well. There's more knowledge about psychology, group dynamics and human energetics. What used to be more mystical has become more naturalized. What used to be attributed to a very special person is now seen as more of a social phenomenon. These days for example, the contributions of the observer and her conditioning play a much larger role in psychological explanations. This includes the EBT model. What might have been seen a century ago as the guru's divine energy might now be seen as dependent on projection from people with very strong and similar beliefs. The guru's special glow might now be seen as the same kind of charisma possessed by politicians and celebrities. Where the guru is concerned, projection and charisma depend on expectations, which take their shape depending on images in social settings and spiritual writings. There's not as great a tendency to see the guru as a single,

personal root cause. There are still interpersonal spiritual experiences and people who help transform others. But today's thinking permits these things to happen more and more among friends.

No power loss

Does the message or experience of liberation get diluted if it reaches you through night-shift clerk at the local 7-11? Isn't it better to go directly to the source? More and more people are saying "No – the source is everywhere." People are understanding liberation as something that can be communicated by anyone, with every breath. Red flags go up whenever someone demands that only certain people can be the source. The source **can** be found at the convenience store, and people are now seeing that it's the same thing that comes from the wise old bearded guy on top of the hill. There's a twinkle in his eye because it's what he's been saying all along.