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CHAPTER 9

The Master-Disciple Relationship[1]

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When I was invited to give this lecture to honor Victor Danner, I knew that nothing short of physical incapacitation could prevent me from accepting. For long before the 1976-77 academic year in which, together with our wives, Victor and I guided thirty students around the world studying religions on location, I had come to regard him with a blend of affection and esteem that very few academic colleagues have drawn from me: that trip vastly deepened our friendship. And when I was asked for the title for my remarks, that too came easily. It was clear to me that I wanted to address the master-disciple relationship, for two reasons. First, during that round-the-world trip I came to look up to Victor Danner as something like my master—not in the full-blown sense of that word that I will be describing here, but certainly as my mentor in matters far exceeding his expertise as an Islamicist. The other and confirming reason for choosing this title was that it brought to mind an essay concerning religious masters that I had read many years ago. It appeared in a volume of essays by Professor Joachim Wach titled *Essays in the History of Religions*, and it impressed me to the point that I promised myself that when I had time I would return to that essay, this time not just to read it, but to study it. We all know, though, what roads paved with good intentions lead to—I never got back to that essay and I saw this lecture as providing the prod to do that. I found Wach's essay quite different from what I wanted to say; still I happily credit him with sparking many of the ideas I will be trying to develop.

Let me begin by staking out my trajectory. I will not concern myself with the conceptual content of what spiritual masters teach, which obviously differs from master to master. Instead I shall try to describe the character of the master's vocation, the kind of person that fits this role. Second, I shall not concern myself with whether the masters

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I shall be mentioning by name perfectly exemplify the type or only approximate it. Disputes over degrees are notoriously indeterminable; as someone remarked, we could argue all night as to whether Julius Caesar was a great man or a very great man. Instead I shall be invoking Max Weber's notion of "ideal types." In the technical sense of that term, which Weber moved into the terminology of sociology, an ideal type resembles a platonic form; whether it is instantiated is secondary because its primary object is to keep our ideas in order. But regarding instantiation, I will say that the much publicized recent rash of fallen gurus who betrayed their vocation is no ground for deprecating the vocation as such, which, I believe, is the highest calling life affords. Religious masters have contributed immeasurably to civilizations, if indeed they did not launch every civilization we know about. As channels for the divine, the greatest pace-setting masters did set civilizations in motion, but nothing in what I say here turns on that opinion. To come back to and restate this second methodological point, it is the ideal type of the master that I will be trying to depict.

Third, I will range cross-culturally in my illustrations of the master's vocation. I found Professor Danner's descriptions of Sufi masters so mesmerizing that I started my preparations for this lecture thinking that I would concentrate on them, but as I got into the subject I realized that those waters are too vast to allow for wading, which is all that I, who am not an Islamicist, could manage. Any stab I might make trying to nuance the differences between the Prophet Muhammad, the proto-typical Islamic master (may peace be upon him), and the masters who followed him—the first four caliphs and their successors; the Imams in the Shi'ite tradition, and masters who are known as Sufis (of which Jalal al-Din al-Rumi is the best known in the West), to mention only obvious subdivisions—would be unworthy of a lecture mounted by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. So I will fall back on my professional enclave as a comparativist and draw my examples from a variety of religious traditions, while noting that I will be skipping over China. Lao Tzu is too obviously mythological to be brought to focus, and though the high regard of Confucius' disciples shines through every page of the *Analects*, the aphoristic character of their reports leads me to consider Confucius, as the Chinese themselves do, as their foremost teacher rather than a religious master. Nor will I cite Socrates, though Plato's portrait of him as master is as convincing as any on record. And while I am mentioning exclusions, let me say that I place prophets in a different category from masters, although some prophets were also masters—I have already mentioned

Muhammad. In Judaism it is the Hasidic *rebbe*, literally "master," rather than biblical prophets or ordained rabbis (teachers) who come closest to the master as I am presenting him here.

My fourth and final guideline is of a different sort, for it is really no more than a didactic device. Contrasts help to sharpen the contours of topics, and so I shall profile the master mostly by contrasting him to teachers. It speaks well for the city of Bloomington to learn that there is a large community contingent in the audience this evening, but I assume that most of you who are here are either teachers or students, so I will etch the master-disciple relationship—in Sanskrit the *guru-chela* relationship and in Arabic the *sheikh-murid* relationship—by contrasting it with the relationship between teachers and students. To keep from rambling, I will itemize the contrasts, but as there is no logical sequence in the order in which I will be discussing them, I shall not number them but demarcate them by placing a bullet before each point.

Having now announced my trajectory, I am ready to set out.

I

▪ What brings students to their teachers is a body of knowledge or a skill that the teacher has mastered and to which the student aspires. Feelings, positive and negative, naturally enter, but they are byproducts of this central objective that brings them together. It is not primarily the teacher as a person who is respected, but what he possesses and can deliver to the student. Comparably, it is not who the student is as a complete person that interests the teacher, but his willingness and ability to learn—other sides of his selfhood are beside the point. The entire relationship is born from, and lives by, shared interest in the object of study. This means that both parties in the relationship are replaceable. Students can shop around for teachers and drift from one to another, and teachers will welcome new generations of students.

The situation in the master-disciple relationship is otherwise. Here the personhood of both parties is central. (It would be less precise to say the personalities of both parties, for "personality" tends to suggest the public image that the party in question presents to the world.) The master does not enjoy the disciple's esteem because he conveys something that is useful in any utilitarian respect. Nor is it a distinguishable attribute of his total self that he seeks to transfer to the disciple—to repeat, a specifiable skill or body of knowledge. What is significant for the disciple is the master's total self, whose character and activity are unique and irreplaceable. In this crucial respect it is like love. More

accurately, it is love in the purest sense of that word, though it is risky to use that word which has been rendered almost useless through its preemption by commercialism (hot dogs "made with a little bit of love"), sex ("making love"), sentimentality (racks of Valentine cards), and innumerable other debasing inroads. Like the master/disciple relationship, authentic love is focused on a unique, irreplaceable person. With the exception of St. Paul in his classic description in First Corinthians, I know of no one who describes authentic love better than Thomas Aquinas, and as his description almost says *in nunce* what I am using this lecture to spell out, I shall summarize it here.

> Love is more unitive than knowledge in seeking the thing, not the thing's reason; its bent is toward a real union. Other effects of love are: a reciprocal abiding of lover and beloved together as one; a transport out of the self to the other; an ardent cherishing of another; a melting so the heart is unfrozen and open to be entered; a longing in absence, heat in pursuit and enjoyment in presence.
>
> In delight, too, there is an all-at-once wholeness and timelessness that reflects the total simultaneity of eternity; an edge of sadness; an expansion of spirit; a complete fulfillment of activity without satiety, for "they that drink shall yet thirst."

■ Students make up their minds and intend to study, whereas disciples are called to discipleship. One thinks immediately of the tax collector Zachaeus who, perched in a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus in the passing throng, heard Jesus tell him to come down, and when he obeyed found himself transformed into an entirely different being. Or again, we think of the beautiful story of the flower scavenger Sunita, who became a renowned member of the Buddha's *sangha* when the Buddha, "seeing the marks of *arhatship* shining in his heart like a lamp in a jar," said to him, "Sunita, what to you is this wretched mode of living? Can you endure to leave the world?" Callings such as these bring disciples to their master because in some mysterious, not fully explicable way, they seem to emanate from the master's completeness. Through this completeness, the master enters and becomes an essential part of the disciple's existence.

■ Continuing with the contrasts, the teacher and student, united as they are through a bond of work on a common task, form a series of links in which the student in his own proper time will himself become a teacher with talents that might surpass those of his own teacher, but this is unlikely in the case of the disciple. I cannot think of a single

case in which a disciple who on becoming a master thought that his bond with his disciples fully equaled the master-disciple cosmos that his own master forged. The teacher heads a school which can gather strength through the work of his successors, whereas the master forms a circle around himself which authentic disciples do not dream of fully replicating. They can radiate some of the charisma they receive from their master, and may attract disciples of their own, becoming thereby masters in their own right. But it will not be the same universe they shared with their own master, and they see it as imitating, not rivaling, the original universe they inhabited.

■ In higher education here teaching typically goes hand in hand with research and publication, teachers can pursue that side of their careers without students, whereas disciples are indispensable for masters to be such. I break in to insert a parenthesis here. To prevent my thesis from suffering death by a thousand qualifications, I am trying to keep the line between master and teacher clear, but obviously there are overlaps—the two do not constitute watertight compartments. Even professors who are chiefly invested in research can find graduate seminars stimulating, and students sometimes cathect to their teachers as if they were masters, as I did in my undergraduate years when for several years one of my professors served as a father figure and role model for me. But having acknowledged such overlaps, I revert to the difference at issue here, which is that the master-disciple relationship centers in mutuality in principle, where the teacher-student relationship does not. The master only becomes a master in his relationship to his disciples, and only through perceptive and comprehending disciples does he become fully aware of his mastership. We think of Jesus at a turning point in his ministry asking his disciples who people were saying that he was. When they answer, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus persists and asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Whereupon Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus then says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:18). In this sense, it is the disciple who ordains his master to mastership.

We find another example of this in the Bhagavad-Gita which revolves around the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the eve of the battle on the Kurukshetra plains that was scheduled to begin the next morning. At the start of their discussion, Arjuna (the prince of the forces of righteousness) is in the superior position, and Krishna

is his charioteer. Their standings are reversed, however, when Arjuna, overcome by the thought of killing his kinfolk, is brought to a state of paralyzing existential bewilderment. When he asks Krishna what he should do, he begins his move toward discipleship, questioning being the first duty of discipleship in Hinduism. Given this opening, Krishna seizes the opportunity and immediately takes control of the situation. Not wasting a word, he tells Arjuna that he is a fool. His bewilderment is caused by false premises and phony arguments. Hearing these blunt words, Arjuna very quickly takes on Hinduism's second requirement of discipleship—submission—and acknowledges that he had been careless in regarding Krishna as no more than his friend and kinsman, oblivious of the fact that he was God incarnate. Here again we see the disciple ordaining the master to mastership. The master reads the confirmation of his calling in the eye of his disciple at the same time that the disciple hears destiny calling him through the master.

■ Pulling together much of what has been said thus far, we can say that the teacher gives of his knowledge and ability, whereas the master gives—not *of* himself as we are likely to say, as if his gift could be isolated from the wholeness of his being, but himself, period. What he is to the disciple he is through the presence of his total selfhood in his every word and deed, right down to what is seemingly trivial. (One thinks of the disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch who traveled a great distance simply to observe how the *rebbe* tied his shoelaces.) The master has become who he is through his own efforts (as inseparably infused with God's grace) and the result, as I say, is always deployed in its completeness. Disciples never perceive that completeness; to do so would require *being* the master. Disciples are able to see, moment by moment, only a facet of the totality as vectored by their respective points of view. Nevertheless, at some level of their being, they sense the presence of the wholeness, as when Jesus' words are heard as being spoken by "one having authority."

■ The teacher as researcher and writer survives in his published work; it is this that constitutes his visible legacy. The master survives only in those who have experienced his impact and bear witness to it. Others can only surmise the full extent of that impact. The disciple testifies to what the master was to him; as he has seen the master, so he paints his portrait to imprint it on his memory and report it to others. But he alone knows the full force of what produced the portrait; others can only glean from it what they can. The other disciples do likewise,

for the desire to share what they have known burns in them all and they are eager to tell others of their firsthand experiences. But, as I have noted, though the master's selfhood is single, it imprints itself on his disciples in dissimilar ways, thereby playing out of the adage that beauty is (in part) in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps the clearest example of the multiplicity of portraits that result is the four Gospel accounts of Jesus which have recently been supplemented by apocryphal accounts such as the Gospel of Thomas—Mark presenting Jesus as wonderworker, John as transparently divine from the start of his mission, Thomas as an Essene, and so on. Each story becomes a legend, and once in place takes on a life of its own which is progressively trimmed to the generic archetype of the master to make it more easily apprehended. In reaching out thus to future generations, the stories become traditions that weave their way into the fabric of history.

■ Continuing with the point that the two preceding paragraphs took up, that the incorrigible matrices of space and time require that the singleness of the masters' selfhood be fractionated by circumstances at hand—Jesus the reconciler is the same Jesus who drives moneychangers out of the temple—the master must live in the constant awareness of time's ephemerality. Only this moment, these circumstances, can disclose this aspect of his total self. The Greek word *kairos*, which carries connotations of the fullness of time, is decisive here, for no eternity can bring back what was missed in the moment of transmittal. Only the sacred hour begets the sacred impact, and many hours will be needed to try to piece together retrospectively as much of it as possible.

This makes timing crucial in the work of the master. It does not require that he carefully calculate what he will do or say; in each moment, at his ease, he gives what the moment calls for. All of the sweetness of moment, with its contextual requirements that are set within horizons that include the apprehension of approaching death, loosen his heart and tongue, and it is as though nothing had been before and nothing will ever be again, and through the frailty of the moment there shines the light of the eternal. A mundane corollary of this is that teachers, when absorbed in their work, tend to resent interruptions, whereas the master's mission consists of nothing but interruptions. It is not hyperbolic to say that dedicated teachers are consumed by projects that they set for themselves, whereas masters consume themselves in simply doing what is at hand, and in so doing they fill the world with light.

■ Teachers and students have things in common on which they work together and which unite them. The master and disciple are either directly united or not at all, and they live with each other in this relationship day in and day out. The teacher praises the swift foot, the skilled hand, the sharp eye, and the keen intellect of the student, while in the master's eye there are no such distinctions. Body and soul (to cite but a single example) are not divided, as evinced by the master's demand that the disciple attend to beauty, inasmuch as those who attend to beauty themselves become beautiful, as Plotinus said. One thinks of the apocryphal story in which Jesus, accompanied by several of his disciples, pass a dead dog by the side of the road. His disciples give it wide berth, noting which Jesus remarks, "but are not its teeth like pearls?" (This anecdote also appears as a *hadith* of the Prophet, from which the apocryphal Christian version very likely derived.) With body and soul undivided, the disciple is asked always to live from the core of his being which too is single, but in a deeper, more hidden, way.

■ Being engaged in the same pursuit bonds students to one another. Jealousies, of course, can and do arise—who will get the scholarships? who is teacher's pet?—but typically belonging to the same school and engaging in a common pursuit bonds students to one another. Thank-God-its-Friday celebration revelries are standard, lifelong friendships are forged, and class reunions mounted.

Discipleship is different. Being one of a group of disciples is no basis for mutual love and rivalries flare at the slightest provocation—we think immediately of Jesus' disciples jockeying for who will sit at his right hand in the coming kingdom—for it seems impossible that someone else should have a part in the relationship that ties the disciple to his master, the lifeblood of which is incomparability and uniqueness on both sides. This leaves no path that leads from one disciple to another. The disciple's conviction that he is devoted and open to the master as no other disciple is leads the disciple to expect this singularity to be reciprocated. Such assumptions are foreign to scholarly activity, which (a point I keep returning to) centers in something that exists objectively outside both teacher and student, the knowledge or skill they are united in trying to convey, or master as the case may be. Related here is the issue of betrayal. The impersonality of the bonding subject matter makes the betrayal of a teacher virtually inconceivable, whereas Judas Iscariot stands as an enduring example of the fact that in the master-disciple relationship that shattering act

not only does occur but is understandable. That Rumi's master, Shams of Tabriz, was murdered by disciples who were jealous of his special bond with Rumi is probably not the case (see below), but it is understandable that the rumor arose.

■ When students and disciples are deprived of their head, the issue of bonding is almost reversed. Students dispute, often bitterly, over what the teacher was driving at and rival schools arise. (One thinks of Mencius and Hsun Tzu as rival interpreters of what Confucius taught, which is another reason for classifying Confucius as a teacher rather than a master.) As for disciples, though they were rivals while their master was living, they now find themselves drawn together by the image of their master which is sacred to them all. Their personal distress, common loneliness, and concern for the future produce a great unity—one thinks of the disciples of Jesus gathering in the Upper Room where tongues of fire descended on them and the Christian Church was born. Such comings-together generate huge spiritual momentums, which time must inevitably erode to some extent. Where some of its original strength is recovered a new master has arisen who creates a distinctive order.

■ To conclude the differences I have itemized, one can have a succession of teachers, but in classic cases only one master. A beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson adapts perfectly to this point.

> The soul selects her own society,
> Then shuts the door;
> On her divine majority
> Obtrude no more.
>
> Unmoved, she notes the chariots pausing
> At her low gate;
> Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
> Upon her mat.
>
> I've known her from an ample nation
> Choose one;
> Then close the valves of her attention
> Like stone.

II

As far as I can see, the traits that I have been ascribing to masters apply generically to them all, but of course each master is also unique—I know of no master other than Muhammad who had an angel, Gabriel, for his master. In between these logical extremes of sameness and difference there are groupings into which masters fall; the genus contains, admits of species, we might say. Jesus and Krishna were incarnations, while Moses and Muhammad were prophets, a category that is itself complex, for by Islamic reckoning, Moses and Muhammad were prophets (*anbiya',* sing. *nabi*) who were also Messengers (*rusul,* sing. *rasul*), by virtue of launching new religions, which not all prophets do. Again, not all prophets prophesy the future, but Muhammad prophesied about the end of the world. Some masters possess supernatural powers as did Ramakrishna who complied with Vivekananda's request for a direct experience of God simply by touching his forehead, but Buddha and Muhammad foreswore miracles. Such categories and their subdivisions could be multiplied indefinitely—but rather than let this lecture degenerate into a catalogue I will devote my remaining space to a single difference that I find most rewarding.

It turns on the issue of tragedy which figures importantly in the mission of some masters, but not all—the missions of Jesus and the Buddha have tragic aspects, but those of Krishna and Muhammad show no trace of it. I will have to enter a gloss on Krishna before I am through, but the paradigmatic portrait of him in the Gita supports the conclusion of students of comparative literature who tell us that it is the Greeks and Shakespeare who dealt consummately with tragedy while in India it scarcely appears—perhaps because Brahman's creations are *lila*, his divine play. As for the Prophet Muhammad, if being orphaned and losing one's only son (to say nothing of wives and daughters) is not tragic the word has no meaning, but those tragedies do not seem to have played an integral part in his mission, as they did in the missions of Jesus and the Buddha. It goes without saving that the category of masters in whose mission tragedy does figure is not exhausted by those two figures, but they are the ones I will focus on.

Tragedy enters first in this class of masters in the requirement that they renounce the world and the best things in it for the sake of what that renunciation will bring to the world. We see this most clearly in the Buddha's realization at an early age that to fulfill his mission he had to abandon his wife and their newborn son, the tenderest ties worldly life affords; but we find it also in Jesus' renunciation, not only of the kingdoms of the earth in his temptation scene, but (as in the

Buddha's case) all prospects of having a family and home of his own. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20, Luke 9:58).

Second, there is the tragedy that these masters realize that what they have to impart is so profoundly contrary to conventional wisdom that even their disciples will be able to comprehend it only partially. This comes out explicitly in Mara's final temptation to the Buddha, that he slip directly from his enlightenment into nirvana because what he discovered under a tree on that holy night was too profound for the world, steeped in *avidya*, ignorance, to grasp. (It wasn't necessary for Mara to go into explanations, but as I tried to show above, the deepest reason for the failure would be that to understand him fully would require that his hearers *become* him, an impossibility.) With the Buddha's retort that "there will be some who will understand"—it would have been more precise if he had said that his disciples would understand in part—this greatest temptation was averted and Mara was banished forever. As for Jesus, the synoptic Gospels, especially Matthew, show him time and again trying to get across to his disciples that that they aren't getting his point. This is the melancholy awareness of all masters in this class—that they will have no real heirs because the sweetest and best fruit that ripens in them can never be given away, inasmuch as whoever comes to himself comes to himself only, not to the master's self. This realization brings to the life of these masters a touch of gentle resignation, of understanding kindness, and of silent grief.

The third and most poignant way in which tragedy enters the life of these masters is in the realization that all his labors must all be pointed toward the moment when they push their disciples away to free them from dependency and force them to stand on their own feet. This is the most sacred moment in the master-disciple relationship, the moment in which the relationship is most intimate; and yet paradoxically it is the one in which the master appears to be disappearing, for above the vocation of these masters is written "farewell." They have done everything they can to attract disciples and draw them as close to themselves as possible, but now they must direct all their labors to severance and thrusting away. Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, is famous for putting things bluntly, and its famous formula here is, "if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha." Jesus moves toward severance more gently when he forewarns his disciples that "the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him" (Matt 17:2-1; see also Matt 20:18 and 26:2). What all this comes down to

is that throughout their ministries these masters can only love their disciples with a tinge of sadness. Their disciples do not understand this sadness. Their highest aspiration is to be intimately related to this master—have they not "followed after him"?—and then suddenly the hour comes, the boom is lowered, and the master pushes them away. In this decisive hour of parting, the disciple will despair either of the master or of himself. He must choose either himself and take leave of the master (who was dearer to him than all things and forever will remain thus in his memory) because he has comprehended that his own place is *here;* or he will deny himself and become an idolater, sentimentally and indulgently worshiping his memory of what his master said and did. So it is, that in the evening of these masters' lives they must watch their faithful disciples move away from them into the twilight of the future. This is the mystery of their loneliness, a loneliness that no one's love can relieve and no understanding can brighten. "Jesus walked that lonesome valley / He had to walk it by himself; / Nobody else could walk it for him / He had to walk it by himself" (an Afro-American spiritual).

In preparing this lecture I promised myself not to enter more than one anecdotal personal memory, and I have decided for this one. When the ten weeks of my *ko'an* training under a Zen master in Myoshinji Monastery in Kyoto began—no sabbatical was in sight and a summer vacation was all that I could manage—I was strictly rehearsed in how to approach the *roshi* in my initial 5 a.m. audience with him. Sliding open the *shoji* (door covered with rice-paper) to his audience chamber, I would bow with palms together (the classic *gassho* or symbol of respect) and step in. The *roshi* would be seated in formal garb on his meditation cushion cattycorner to the door I had entered and I would hug the walls and, on reaching the wall opposite me, make a right angle turn toward him. (No diagonals; you don't cut corners in Zen.) On reaching him I would sink to my knees and, with my forehead on the tawny straw *tatami* mat, I would extend my arms toward him, lifting my cupped fingers upward, the classic gesture for lifting the dust off the feet of the Buddha.

Initially I found this grating. My Protestant upbringing had admonished me to bow down to neither priest nor king, and here I was kowtowing to a mere mortal. I was surprised, though, by how quickly that feeling dissolved. My esteem for my Zen master was rising so rapidly that by the third day all I wanted to do was to spend the whole day bowing to him.

Having reported those first early morning encounters, I skip now to the reason for entering this anecdote—our final meeting. That meeting was the opposite of those first stern, formal ones. The *roshi* had invited me to his living quarters, a small pavilion close to the monastery, and the mood was comfortable and relaxed. After small talk about the weather which was beginning to cool after the oppressive humidity of the Kyoto summer, he said he was glad that I had come and wished me a safe journey home, adding a reminder that while in flight I should *gassho* inwardly to the innumerable people who would have cooperated to get me home.

He then offered to show me his living quarters. Exiting the back door of the small living room where we were seated, he introduced me in passing to Iksan, the tiny old woman "who takes care of my physical needs" and was preparing his evening meal. Then he led me into his bedroom where, beside his padded sleeping quilt on the floor, there was set an armchair that faced a television screen. "This is where I watch sumo wrestling in the evenings," he said; "Do you watch sumo wrestling?" When I answered in the negative, he said, "Too bad. It's wonderful." He then ushered me out of the backdoor where a half-dozen crates of empty beer bottles were arranged along the wall. "These are the remains of the beer I drink while watching sumo wrestling." And that was it; the cook's tour was completed. We returned to his living room where, after a few more words, we bade each other goodbye.

As I made my way through the narrow lanes to where I was staying that last night, it became apparent to me that the purpose of this final exercise was to dismantle the pedestal onto which I had placed my *roshi* in the course of the summer. Its elevation had encouraged me to pour everything I had into my summer's training, but the time had come to go my own way.

Anecdote completed, I come back to the main point of this second half of my lecture which is to bring out category differences in the master's vocation. Having described the parting that figures importantly in the vocation of some masters, I will now turn to their opposite numbers, focusing on a single example in India.

Most aspects of the *guru-chela* relationship in Hinduism fit comfortably into the paradigm I presented in the first half of this lecture, as does the concept of the *acharya*, the perfected guru who teaches by example. Here, though, I am looking at differences, and Krishna is a master who does not leave his disciples. *Dvaitic*, dualistic, Hindus come down hard on this point, looking to *acharyas* like Ramanuja

and Chaitanya, founders, respectively of the Shri Vaishnava school and the Harikrishna movement which continues in full force today. Arguing that their rivals—the *advaitic*, non-dual, Shaivites whose chief spokesman is Sankara—were influenced by the Buddha's renunciation of a personal God, the dualists are passionately theistic and try to develop as personal a relationship with their personal deities as they can. Relationship being the lifeblood in theism, the Gods of India's theist always come in couples—Radha-Krishna, Sita-Ram, Lakshmi-Narayan—with the Goddess always named first, before the God. (In reporting this difference I seem to be violating one of the guidelines I set for myself at the start of this lecture where I said I would not be going into differences in what masters teach. I would stick to profiling their role, but I am allowing myself this one exception because in this instance a doctrinal difference leads directly to a difference in masters' understandings of their roles.) In the theistic lineage, disciples cannot conceive of their *gurus* ever working themselves out of their job and leaving them. They will keep reincarnating themselves for as long as it takes for their disciples to become enlightened, and even after their disciples have dropped the body permanently, their *guru* will be with them forever in paradise, for (as I say) there is no happiness for theists outside of relationship. (Pure Land Buddhism sides with the Vaishnavites here.) In this mode, *gurus*, as the ads for diamonds have it, "are forever."

As I come to the close of this lecture I want to say something that doubles back on everything I have said in it. Scientists have discovered that the deeper they probe into nature's foundations, the more they find that the divisions that carried them toward those foundations turn out to be provisional only, not final; and in much the same way I find that the divisions that I set out to explore and which have structured this lecture—differences between masters and teachers and between kinds of masters—likewise prove to be provisional. The division between *gurus* who take leave of their *chelas* and those that do not that I just presented as clear-cut turns out not to be clear-cut at all. Sri Krishna *does* take leave of his disciples. He abandons them, not (to be sure) in the Gita's story but as the *Puranas* fill in his biography.

Krishna's geographical locale was Vrindavan, but after he has won the hearts of the cowgirls and throngs of others, he abruptly disappears. Whether it was to kill evil kings or to tend to his aging parents some distance away or for some other reason we are not told, but the fact remains: summarily he leaves Vrindavan, leaving his disciples guru-less for the rest of their lives. We can only begin to imagine the

sense of abandonment that they had to live with for the rest of their lives.

This does not upset the fact that theistic Hindus never doubt that the cosmic Krishna is forever at their side, but introducing the Puranic account of his life does blur the image of him as a non-leave-taking master with which I began and it prompts me to look back over my shoulder and take a second look at what I said about no leave-taking in Islam. Muhammad was separated from his followers only by his death at a mature age, but in Shi'ite Islam, his rightful successor, Ali, was murdered along with his two sons, and this has placed abandonment at the very heart of this branch of Islam. In the *majlis* in Tehran that I was allowed to attend, as the night deepened the *fuqara'* worked themselves into a frenzy bewailing the slaughter of Ali and his sons. In other contexts this turns many Shi'ites into *Penitentes* as they lash their backs with ropes and even swords to maximize their identification with the injustice done to Ali. The parallel with Christian *Penitentes* who mutilate themselves to identify with Christ's crucifixion is so close to this as to require no comment. This raises the deep question of the role such suffering plays in a relationship. I can only venture that grief in abandonment may bond disciples to their masters more completely than any other emotion, which might be the truth in the adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Shams' abandonment of Rumi—the rumor that he was murdered by jealous disciples "arrives late, circulates in oral context, and is almost certainly groundless" (Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, p. 193)—drew from Rumi some of his ecstatically grief-stricken poems. If this is on the right track, disciples in this camp actively cultivate the sorrow in separation to engender what they consider the highest and purest form of love. We might find them asking if the love between Jesus and his disciples was ever greater than in the poignant pathos of the Last Supper.

Have these last paragraphs deconstructed my entire lecture by admitting that the distinctions that I have used to format it are only provisional? I do not think so, for distinctions have their uses and are indispensable in dealing with life in this world—we continue to work with Newtonian physics even though we know that its laws are violated in the deeper level of nature. So I do not think that Victor Danner would reject on principle my modest effort to honor him with this lecture. On the contrary: I think he would welcome the fact that the distinctions I have worked with collapse in the end in *tawhid*, affirmation of the Divine Unity. And I am confident that he would

deal gently with the infirmities that have preceded that affirmation in the course of this hour.

The Master-Disciple Relationship
by William C. Chittick

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