

Profiles of Cult Leaders

In the other webinars of this series on cults, we have examined how people become involved in cults, and the impact of cults on their personality functioning. In this webinar, we will focus on the charismatic leaders who lead these cults, and what factors might influence them to create a group that manipulates and abuses their followers.

We will first look into how personality disorders impact how cult leaders operate. We will also examine the characteristics of the psychopathic personality, which typifies the profile of many cult leaders. We will also examine the role of grandiosity and narcissism that characterizes the expression of some of these leaders.

Personality Disorders in Spiritual Teachers

Excerpted from *Meditation and Therapy: Theory and Application*

The personality is one of the ways through which a spiritual teacher interacts with his or her followers. This personal connection is conveyed through the teacher's behavior, verbal teachings, and moral example.

Until the seeker is able to commune with the spiritual teacher on the higher Planes in the Guide form, the personality of the teacher is the primary mode of communication with the seeker.

In some spiritual traditions, the personality is seen as evil, illusory, or inherently flawed. Spiritual practice in these groups seeks to transcend, suspend, or severely limit the expression of personality-level behavior and communication. Seekers are taught not to cultivate the personality, but to identify with their spiritual essence and remain in union with that higher nature.

When spiritual teachers come from a dysfunctional family environment and/or practice personality suppression for many years, it is not surprising that they may develop personality disorders.

Personality disorders may take the following forms in spiritual teachers.

| Personality Disorder | Expression in Spiritual Teacher |
|----------------------|---|
| Obsessive Compulsive | The teacher is obsessed with exact practice of rituals, scrupulous cleanliness, punctuality, and exact practice of meditation techniques. The teacher requires "sinless" behavior, and has perfectionistic standards. The teacher may have followers repeat tasks over and over to get them "right." |
| Narcissistic | The teacher demands worship, devotion and sacrifice, dedication of all wealth, time, and life by the devotee. The teacher expects the devotee to never to hesitate for a moment with any demand, no matter how costly, dangerous, or degrading. The teacher's needs require immediate attention and fulfillment. The teacher seems to seek continual recognition that he or she is a savior, a Master, an incarnation of the Divine, or a prophet. The teacher's speech may have grandiose references to his or her greatness. The teacher seems unable to sense the distress or concerns of followers, and may discount those feelings as not important. |
| Paranoid | The teacher has apocalyptic beliefs that the world is coming to an end, or that he or she is the embodiment and fulfillment of a Divine prophecy. The teacher believes that the world is evil, and that the group and its followers are being persecuted by the outside world. The teacher embodies black and white thinking: others are "saved" or "damned," "good" or "evil," "with us" or "against us." There is no middle ground, no shades of gray. When severely paranoid, the leader may stockpile weapons or poisons, actively preparing the group for a coming confrontation with the embodiment of evil. |
| Schizoid | The teacher withdraws into seclusion and may lead a hermetic, celibate lifestyle. The teacher may be markedly eccentric in his or her attire, mannerisms, or speech. The teacher has a highly analytic approach to spirituality, and doesn't seem to express emotions at all. The teacher spends most of the time alone, and seems to have little contact with others. |

| Personality Disorder | Expression in Spiritual Teacher |
|----------------------|--|
| Schizotypal | The teacher exhibits marked eccentricity in speech and appearance, often with a disheveled appearance. The teacher's lectures communicate very odd ideas, and may be disorganized, even incoherent. The teacher confides experiences with UFOs, space aliens, or great Masters that seem like complete fantasies. |
| Avoidant | The teacher hides his or her spiritual attainment, tries to find any excuse not to teach. He or she may experience overwhelming shyness in groups or dread group contact. One close disciple may be allowed to convey the teachings by writing or discourse. The followers may be told that the Master does not give personal audience. |
| Dependent | The teacher refuses to let go of his or her former teacher. If the former teacher is living, the teacher may follow his or her predecessor everywhere. Despite being authorized to teach, the teacher may not feel worthy or capable of fulfilling his or her commission. The teacher may seek excuses not to teach, and may authorize followers to deliver teachings on his or her behalf. The teacher may say these are teachings of the predecessor, and that he or she is unable to hold a candle to the predecessor's greatness. [You may sense this demonstration of humility seems fearful.] |
| Antisocial | The teacher uses the group to commit criminal acts or raise money for his or her own enrichment. The teacher may use manipulation or deception to get followers to join the group, then use group pressure and coercion to keep the follower loyal to the group, and keep them from leaving. The teacher may exploit the follower's labor by making them work 12 to 16 hour days without pay, often to raise money for the group. The teacher may seduce followers or molest their children. The teacher will find a scapegoat and blame that other person if the teacher becomes the spotlight of negative press, or his or her behavior falls under suspicion. |

| Personality Disorder | Expression in Spiritual Teacher |
|----------------------|--|
| Histrionic | The teacher uses drama and suspense to influence the emotions of his or her followers. At one moment the teacher may whip them up into a positive mood of hope and expectation; in another moment, he or she may convey disappointment and despondency. The followers seem to have to keep the teacher in a good mood. The teacher may be playful, seductive, or flirtatious with his or her followers, but adamantly denies any lascivious intentions. If things go wrong, the teacher may berate followers without mercy, even when it becomes clear that the teacher's own actions have caused the problem. |
| Borderline | The teacher seems prone to tyrannical emotional outbursts. The teacher may highly praise and idealize his or her followers, only to shortly thereafter mercilessly castigate and berate them for failing to live up to the teacher's expectations. The teacher seems to see people as only all good and perfect, or evil and degraded. The teacher may have self-destructive behavior or addiction that becomes increasingly apparent. The teacher may threaten to leave this Plane, or leave and never come back (e.g., commit suicide) if followers do not meet his or her demands. Followers may say that they do not know what to expect from their teacher next, and feel frankly abused. [You may sense the teacher is using emotional blackmail to manipulate the group.] |

When the teacher acts strange, seekers are sometimes taught that this is the Divine Play (Lila), and that teachers in spiritual ecstasy are not bound by conventional rules for behavior. What may be actually happening is that the teacher's genuine illumination is expressing through the distorted filter of a personality disorder.

[In the case of a “spiritual teacher” with anti-social personality disorder, there may be no genuine illumination at all—just a very skillful con-job perpetrated by a master charlatan.]

Normal Personality Expression

While the aspirant may not be able to impact the personality dysfunction of a spiritual teacher, the aspirant can work to clean his or her own filter. The seeker can do this contemplating, “what is appropriate personality expression?” Appropriateness takes into consideration the seeker’s own needs, together with the needs of others in the situation, and notes the impact of behavior on self, others, and the environment.

Personality disorder skews the expression of a person’s functioning away from the golden mean of “normal” or “appropriate.” The aspirant may wish to use the following chart to differentiate the distorted expression of a personality disorder from what might be a more optimal, more effective way of relating and behaving.

| Personality Disorder | Distorted Expression | Optimal Expression |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Obsessive Compulsive | Over-control, inability to let go | Appropriate detachment and perspective |
| Narcissistic | Exaggerated self-importance | Appropriate self-image |
| Paranoid | Inability to trust | Appropriate trust |
| Schizoid | Emotional suppression | Appropriate emotional expression |
| Schizotypal | Immersion in fantasy | Appropriate grounding in reality, paying attention to situational cues |
| Avoidant | Shame, flawed self-image, fear of humiliation | Appropriate self-image, healthy sense of shame and embarrassment, ability to laugh at oneself |
| Dependent | Lack of belief in oneself | Appropriate sense of confidence and skill mastery |

| Personality Disorder | Distorted Expression | Optimal Expression |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Antisocial | Suppression of conscience, lack of caring for others | Appropriate conscience function, establishment of a support network of loving relationships with others, the ability to love and care for others |
| Histrionic | Over-dramatization of issues, sexual manipulation | Appropriate perspective on personal issues and appropriate expression of sexuality |
| Borderline | Lack of emotional control, splitting the world into good and evil | Appropriate emotional control, seeing objects as containing both good and evil |

The decision to act in a certain way is often a response to the perceived situation. The question the seeker is pursuing is “what is called for at this time?” or “what is appropriate in this situation?” Maintaining this mindful approach, the aspirant may find he or she has a real choice in the situation, instead of blindly reacting.

The Mudrashram Teachings on Personality

In the Mudrashram® teachings, we encourage individuals to develop both personality and spirituality. We do not see personality as flawed or evil, but as the vehicle through which individuals express in the physical world.

There are times when you must function attentively, sensitively, rationally, and effectively in the external world. For this you need to develop your personality to become a refined instrument for your Soul’s use.

You develop your personality by

- Learning vocational skills to earn your livelihood
- Honing your social skills to develop effective relationships with others
- Expanding your knowledge through education
- Introspecting upon your behavior and attitudes to refine your conscience
- Exercising your judgment, intuition, and decision-making
- Reflecting on the results of your performance with an aim to continually improve it
- Acquiring the skills for independent living and for parenting your children
- Cultivating the ability to listen and to achieve intimacy with others

There are times when you must transcend personality functioning to commune with your spiritual essence. In this time of communion you work to awaken, refine, and unfold your spiritual potentials, so that you may express a greater measure of love, wisdom, and ability in the world. For this, you have the tools of meditation.

We work on both aspects in a balanced way. In this way you can avoid the pitfalls engendered by neglecting either aspect of your nature.

By over-focusing on the spiritual aspect of their natures, some spiritual teachers have developed personality disorders. We believe you can avoid this by

1. Understanding what is appropriate personality expression
2. Finding an appropriate balance between your spiritual development and your personality development that keeps you sane

3. Identifying a spiritual teaching that responds to your needs, but does not require you to “go off the deep end” into the zombie-like trance of a religious cult, or into the jihad mentality of fanaticism.

Dealing With a Spiritual Teacher That Acts Strangely

If you discern that a spiritual teacher with whom you have had contact and valued interaction is acting strangely, you may wish to consider what may be producing the odd behavior. If you intuit the teacher's behavior may stem from a personality disorder, or evidence an anxiety syndrome or even a psychotic illness, this may not be sufficient to make you reject the teacher and his or her teachings outright.

You may wish to consider the following things before walking away from the teacher:

1. If I ignore the teacher's strangeness and idiosyncrasies, is there value in what I am being taught?
2. Am I making genuine, tangible spiritual progress by pursuing these teachings?
3. Am I functioning more effectively in my personal life as a result of pursuing these teachings?
4. Does what I am learning here resonate with my intuition and my heart's touchstone of truth? Is it helping me to understand my Soul's nature and my level of development in the Great Continuum of Consciousness?
5. Am I contacting the Divine through the practices I am learning here, or through the ministry and guidance of the teacher?
6. Does the teacher manifest the love, wisdom, and power that evidence the state of Mastery? Do I experience Grace, Divine Love and Light, or Shakti through his or her presence?

7. Does the teacher seem to genuinely care for my welfare, health, and happiness? Do I feel genuine love from this teacher?

We will point out that great Masters and Gurus have arisen, who have studied with eccentric, strange, even bizarre teachers. If the Guru is an odd bird, but fills you day and night with the love and Grace of God, you may elect to tolerate his or her kookiness.

But if you have made an honest inquiry and your answers to these questions are no, get up and leave. Your human life is a terrible thing to waste in pursuit of a spiritual dead end. Worse is to suffer abuse at the hands of a mentally ill spiritual group leader.

The Cult Leader as Psychopath

We gain some insights into the nature of the cult leader as a psychopath in the writings of Tobias and Lalich, and also from psychoanalyst, Otto Kernberg.

Excerpted from *Religions, Cults, and Terrorism: What the Heck Are We Doing?*

A key factor for cult members to make the decision to leave is identifying that they were exploited, abused, or betrayed by the leader or the group. Cult members leaving these groups are counseled by Tobias and Lalich (1994) to review their recruitment experiences, identify psychological manipulation used in the group, and to examine doubts and fears they have about leaving their group. *They also ask the ex-cult member to identify if the cult leader fits the personality profile of a psychopath.*

The cult leader is variously described as charismatic, and authoritarian, and psychopathic. Tobias and Lalich (1994) state that a true psychopath has 15 characteristics:

- (1) Glibness (a facility with using language to beguile, confuse, and convince) and superficial charm
- (2) Manipulation and conning
- (3) A grandiose sense of self

- (4) Pathological lying
- (5) Lack of remorse, shame, or guilt
- (6) Shallow or calculated expression of emotions
- (7) Incapacity for love
- (8) Need for stimulation (thrill-seeking)
- (9) Callousness, or lack of empathy
- (10) Poor behavioral controls; impulsive nature
- (11) Early behavior problems; they have a common history of juvenile delinquency
- (12) Irresponsibility and unreliability
- (13) Promiscuous sexual behavior or infidelity
- (14) Lack of a realistic life plan and adopting a parasitic lifestyle (living on the donations of followers)
- (15) Exhibiting criminal or entrepreneurial versatility (ability to resurface and start over when exposed to community antipathy and media exposure)...

[We note that not all cult leaders will have all of these characteristics, but you will find that they may have many of these traits.]

The psychopathic cult leader thrives on idealization from followers while brazenly exploiting them. To break out of this web of illusion, the members must stop idealizing the leader and admit that they have been exploited. This means they must break through their own rationalization and denial and come to grips with this painful truth—and they must leave the group, despite their terror and uncertainty about the future...

Kernberg's observations about unstructured therapeutic groups in an inpatient setting also shed light on the dynamics underlying cult formation. *Under certain conditions, groups can also act to give ascendancy to narcissistic and antisocial personalities, who manipulate and exploit the group to meet their own needs. This may transform into a sense of "messianic mission" [patterns typical of the cult leader, which lead to the excesses seen in groups headed by authoritarian or charismatic leaders].*

Kernberg adds, these "unstructured group processes also foster regression because they tap profound longings for protective messianic and paranoid ideologies; they weaken ordinary time considerations [emphasizes a "here and now orientation" that ignores long term consequences on personality and organization], traditional organizational structures [which set into motion orderly policies and processes to attenuate the impact of regressive tendencies within the group], and personality influences in terms of the reality of the task; they foster, instead, narcissistic leadership and ideological simplifications..."

The inherent dangers in remaining in these highly suggestible states for long periods of time are that the normal reality testing mechanisms of the mind are temporarily suspended, and this makes the practitioner exceptionally vulnerable to influence by others.

If this agent of influence is a cult leader, who has been characterized as a psychopath (antisocial personality disorder) or grandiose narcissist (narcissistic personality disorder), the individual may be entrapped interminably in an exploitive relationship that exists only to serve the cult leader's needs.

Moreover, because these ASC are inherently dissociative in nature, and may, as Conway and Siegelman (1978) caution, "dissolve the personality," the potential for residual dissociative disorders and disorientation are dramatically heightened in individuals who remain for long periods of time in these states.

Reintegration of Narcissistic Deviation from Optimal Functioning

Excerpted from *Meditation and Therapy: Theory and Application*

The sense of self-love and self-valuing in a person is called narcissism. This narcissism can be healthy, permitting optimal adjustment to the individual's social and intrapersonal world, or it can express in the extremes of fragmentation or grandiosity. This continuum of the narcissistic bands is shown below.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Characterized by a fragmented, disjointed sense of self. The individual has difficulty owning behavior, beliefs, and feelings. Fragmentation may be dissociative (e.g. Multiple Personality Disorder), memory-based or temporal (e.g. fugue), affective (Bipolar Personality Disorder), or cognitive (ranging from pre-psychotic to psychotic thought disorders) splitting from a unitive sense of self. |
| 2 | Characterized by a conflicted, dualistic sense of self where the individual identifies with one set of behavior, beliefs, and feelings and rejects the other side as ego alien. Marked by internal argument and dialogue between parts of oneself. Difficulty in goal-oriented behavior and focusing on goals: the internal conflict uses much energy and attention. |
| 3 | Characterized by a largely owned sense of self, but with "islands" of ego-dystonic behavior, beliefs, and feelings. The individual may feel largely in control of his or her life and affairs, but has a few odd, disturbing, or compulsive areas of behavior that arise in certain situations. These concern the individual. |
| 4 | Characterized by an owned sense of self and adoption of solutions or sublimations that allow the individual to own and master his or her drives satisfactorily, coupled with developed interpersonal skills. <i>This is considered healthy, normal adult adjustment.</i> |
| 5 | The individual begins to think more highly of him or herself than others. The person may begin to see themselves as superior to others, more intelligent, and may identify with those of his or her "own kind" or may isolate him or herself. The individual may become arrogant, intimidating, judgmental, overconfident, and impatient with those who can't keep up. This is described as unhealthy narcissism. |

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| 6 | The individual begins to become absorbed in creative inspiration or meditative reverie and may neglect appearance, care of the environment and proper self-care. The individual may become moody, prone to creative flights of fancy and cascades of ideas. The individual can appear to be eccentric or odd. The individual may indulge in private, symbolic rituals. |
| 7 | Characterized by identification with an element of the Superconscious mind, or “collective unconscious.” The individual may believe that he or she is a “messenger” or “prophet of God,” “a chosen one,” or on a “Divine mission.” Some of these individuals are very charismatic, and may attract groups of people around them to “love them, serve them, and worship them.” If they are confronted, criticized, or ostracized by those who are not part of the group, but who point out errors or excesses of the group and its leader, the leader and the group may begin to develop delusional and paranoid thinking. |

Meditation upon the qualities of normal adult adjustment will be helpful in regaining a balance when self-concept has deviated from the centered, integral basis of relating. These qualities of the normal adult adjustment include:

| | | |
|---|---------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Equalitarian relation to others | Sees oneself as an equal to others, not below or above them |
| 2 | Empathic stance | One seeks to understand self and others |
| 3 | Realistic evaluation of others | One does not jump to conclusions, or prejudge others based on stereotypes; forms hypotheses which are confirmed or disconfirmed by continued experience and data; others' behavior is appraised and not made to fit into a preconceived filter or pattern |
| 4 | Honest evaluation of self | One frankly acknowledges one's strengths and weaknesses, and does not minimize or inflate these abilities |
| 5 | Growth orientation | One continuously is seeking new knowledge, new abilities, taking measured risks to expand one's personal horizons |
| 6 | Humanistic standpoint | One identifies with the Self and sees others in this same light, recognizing both lower nature (ego) and higher nature (spirituality) in self and others |
| 7 | Humility | One experiences gratitude for what one has gained and experienced, and realizes one's mortality, human frailties and limitations without defensive denial or escape into fantasy. One has a healthy awe and respect for the beauty and majesty of Nature and the Cosmos. |

Deviance from the central position can be marked in some individuals by polar shifts between fragmented, split states (1–3) to grandiose, self-absorbed states (5–7). These individuals may oscillate between positions 3 and 5, 2 and 6, and 1 and 7 on the narcissistic bands, spending little time, if any, in the state of integrated functioning. Thus an individual identified with an element of the collective unconscious may be seen to alternately exhibit various types of cognitive disorder, rapid idealization and devaluation of others, and dissociative loss of orientation characteristic of band 1.

By increasing the amount of time spent in the central integrated position, the innate healing and integrative tendencies of the mind will tend to collapse these polarities into a unitive relating style characteristic of appropriate self-concept. This type of reflection may have relevance through the psychotherapeutic rebuilding of healthy self-concept, and countering fragmented and grandiose deviations from this state of optimal functioning.



Have you ever listened to the discourse of a spiritual teacher, about whom you sensed something was not right? Do you believe that teacher might have had a personality disorder? What type?

Have you ever experienced dealing with person with psychopathic tendencies? How did he or she attempt to manipulate you? Have you ever been involved with a spiritual teacher who might have had them?

Have you ever dealt with a person with grandiose narcissism? How did they make you feel? Did you every encounter a spiritual teacher who had these traits?

References

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