

## The Ambiguous and/or Abusive guru phneomenon

"Real Masters never charge for their services, nor do they accept payment in any form or any sort of material benefits for their instructions. This is a universal law among Masters, and yet it is an amazing fact that thousands of eager seekers in America and elsewhere, go on paying large sums of money for "spiritual instruction.". Masters are always self-sustaining. They are never supported by their students or by public charity."

Julian P. Johnson, *The Path of the Masters* ([original url](#))

### Introduction

The Abusive Guru is an all too common phenomenon in the "spiritual supermarket".

Abusive gurus are almost always highly charismatic, and often have [a lot of charisma and personal power, but little insight](#). They may be emotionally immature (although this is not necessarily the case), and the very worst ones (although fortunately a small minority) are parasitic sociopaths. The better ones are sincere and genuine in trying to help their devotees. The problem is, they believe thmselves to be "[Enlightened](#)", when they are not. They may suffer from some degree of [inflation](#) and [Narcissistic personality disorder](#), and having a tendency to [somasochistic](#) co-dependency with their [disciples](#) and [devotees](#). They justify their abusive treatment by in terms of pseudo-spiritual psychobabble like "[crazy wisdom](#)" and "[breaking down the ego](#)", and, I believe, they genuinely sincerely believe that this is what they are doing, and do it with the best intentions, albeit with unacknowledged selfishness determining their actions.

It is important to understand that no truly [Realized](#) being, no [True Guru](#), is ever abusive, ever. There is no exception to this rule, because abusiveness is a result of narcissism and ego, nothing else, and the primary definition of a true guru is they no longer possess ego. Thus any (and I mean *any*!) abusive behavior of the sort described here immediately and absolutely defines that so-called teacher or so-called master as being of at most partial or limited realisation.

Basically then, the definition of abusive guru is that they either consciously or unconsciously manipulate the trust placed in them by their devotees for personal sexual or financial gain, or play emotional mindgames on them, while for the most part genuinely believing they are helping their devotees and disciples by doing this. In the worst cases, they may also ecourage or incite violence or abuse against ex-devotees. Once this happens you know that whatever good was there at the start has pretty much been lost. Some cult leaders like Sun Myung Moon are as far as I know sincere, and while I may disagree with their religion, there do not seem to be instances of deliberate and conscious abuse on their part.

This does not mean that such gurus are completely negative. For some they provide great spiritual inspiration and genuine help. They themselves may have profound genuine experiences, and can transfer these experiencxes to their devotees. That is the paradox of the Intermediate Zone.

### Two types of abusive guru

There are two types of abusive gurus - those who are at the level of [avidya](#) and have only a superficial realisation, and [those who have attained the intermediate zone](#) and hence have genuine experiences and enlightenments, but still the persistence of samskaras like desire, egotism etc. These two categories do not constitute a hard and fast distinction, since each shades into the other, and it may even often happen that an abusive guru may equally belong in both categories. All these categories are after all purely mental, and shouldn't be taken too rigidly.

**Avidyan gurus** may have some genuine experiences, and even in some cases occult powers deriving from the subtle regions, but lack anything corresponding to real or even to partial enlightenment. They may and probably do genuinely believe their own claims, and that they are helping people. And they may even help some emotionally dependent or insecure people who need a authority figure, through giving them something to believe in. But through normal ego and desire they cannot help but take advantage of this, and abuse and manipulate their devotees, often not out of wickedness (genuinely evil or psychopathic fake teachers are very rare), but simply because power corrupts.

**Intermediate zone gurus** have genuine enlightenment experiences and powers, which they derive from the intermediate zone, which is the developmental level at which they are stuck. It is important to understand that not all Intermediate zone gurus are abusive. There are some, perhaps many, with partial realisation who are nevertheless [genuine](#). The effect of the intermediate zone experience is nicely described by [Ken Wilber](#) as "One Taste sufficiency that leaves schmucks as it finds them". In other words, people who were spiritual and selfless before, become genuine gurus; those with lower desires and selfishness and egos become abusive gurus. But in keeping with the paradoxical nature of the intermediate zone, even abusive intermediate zone gurus genuinely do help some people, just as they harm others.

Regardless of their attainment or lack thereof, abusive gurus always behave in some sort of [cultic](#) fashion, and their followers (many of which may suffer from excessive naivety or low self-esteem) tend to have an uncritical attitude of rationalisation towards the ill-treatment handed out at them.

### Characteristics

It is suggested that abusive gurus can be recognised by at least several of the following characteristics:

- Sexually abusive behaviour
- Demanding or requesting large "donations" (to fund an unnecessarily opulent or wealthy lifestyle)
- Acting or teaching one way in public and another in private (e.g. celibate gurus justifying sex with female disciples as "Tantric Initiation")
- Narcissistic behaviour
- Using insulting words or other abusive behaviour to "break down your ego".
- Physical abuse, usually by telling devotees to assault other devotees
- Taking advantage of the disciples trust; controlling or forcing them to do something they don't want to
- Emotionally sadistic (and in extreme cases physically sadistic)
- Vindictive attitude towards ex-devotees
- Responding to critics with anger, bitterness, hatred, or mockery rather than love

(this list is from  [part 2 of my essay on Integral World](#))

Or as the [Fourth Way](#) teacher  [Selim Aissel](#) puts it:

- flee those who demand unconditional obedience to themselves or to their representatives or assistants.
- flee those who require you to cut yourself off from your family or social relationships.
- flee those who prohibit you from seeing the people you want.
- flee organisations that demand large sums of money.
- flee organisations that display their luxury and wealth.
- flee those who deprecate other ways.
- flee those who acknowledge their own teaching alone as valid.
- flee those who teach you to neglect your family, professional, or social life in order to benefit their organisation.
- flee those who make a rule out of limiting sleep and restricting your diet, and teach you all kinds of methods that make you physically weaker.
- flee those who judge and condemn.
- flee those who require you to believe instead of to understand and verify.
- flee those who require you to confess.
- flee those who make you believe you are guilty.
- flee those who lack a sense of humor.
- flee those who employ threats or fear.
- flee those who only talk about spirituality without really practicing it.
- flee those who promise Heaven after death (especially if you pay them!).
- flee those who promise Hell if you don't convert.
- flee those who divide principles and people into good and bad.
- flee those who adopt stereotyped attitudes, ways of talking, sitting, dressing, and moving.
- flee those who take themselves to be prophets or messiahs.
- flee those who often change teachings and teachers.
- flee those who envy each other.
- flee those who compete with each other or with other organisations.
- flee those who only practice within their organisation and not outside of it.
- flee those who claim that they understand everything and have nothing left to learn.

### Types of Abusive Behaviour

There are a number of categories of abusive behaviour. Most abusive gurus will tend to specialise in only one or two. Also the degree of abuse will vary greatly, from mild to extreme. The following list is probably not exhaustive:

#### Sexual abuse and manipulation - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - genuine celibate or consensual relationship wirth non-devotee
- none - non-harmful consensual relationships
- mild - occasional incidents, but little harm done
- moderate - some incidents, betrayal of trust, some adversely affected
- serious - many incidents, some resulting in serious psychological harm, justified by the guru and supported or ignored by the organisation
- extreme - chronic, frequent, or widespread abuse, some of a criminal nature, to which the organisation turns a blind eye or blames the victim

#### Financial abuse and exploitation - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - everything free or by sincere donation, no pressure
- none - non-profit (covers cost only) or purely by donation without coercion
- mild - profit-making but no coercion; the organisation may be involved in business activities, marketing, franchising, etc. While the organisation may run as a business it is not as such any more immoral then any other materialistic venture (it is only immoral in that it uses spirituality for this role).
- moderate - coercion for donations, usually based on exploitive teachings. workshops and retreats much more expensive than they need to be
- serious - coercion and psychological pressure and manipulation for large donations, workshops and retreats very expensive and can be seen as a money-making gimmick,
- extreme - extreme psychological manipulation so that the devotee gives their life savings to the guru or his/her organisation

#### Emotional abuse and manipulation - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - totally giving
- none - just responding like an ordinary person
- mild - occasional incidents, but little harm done
- moderate - some incidents, use of guilt or other tactics, some adversely affected
- serious - many incidents of emotional manipulation and abusive so-called "crazy wisdom", playing with the devotees feelings, manipulating them to protect the so-called Guru's hypersensitive ego and prevent questioning of leadership style, justified by the guru and supported or ignored by the organisation
- extreme - extreme emotional manipulation, sometimes resulting in serious psychological harm to the sensitive deveotee

**Antagonistic attitude towards, and sometimes even encouraging their devotees in harassment of, Critics and Ex-devotees.** This is one form of abusive behaviour in which the devotee fully partakes, and is the doer, rather than the receiver or victim - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - [no concern, no matter what the criticism, even if it is total lies](#)
- none - may get irritated or angry but no big deal, and never takes it further.
- mild - mild ad hominem response to critics, defensive ego, some shadow projection
- moderate - ad hominem attacks against and [shadow projection on](#) critics, even if what they say is totally authentic or is worthy of sincere inquiry
- serious - encouraging or allowing devotees to make libelous and slanderous vendettas against critics, detailed muck-raking, smear campaigns (see also [Slanderous devotee](#)).
- extreme - encouraging or allowing devotees to make threats of and/or use of physical violence, intimidation, even murder

#### Authoritarianism and Thought Control - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - everyone encouraged to find their own Truth or path, Guru is a guide only
- none - teachings but no coercion; open enquiry, critiquing, etc
- mild - mildly authoritarian, but independent thought and mild criticism allowed
- moderate - authoritarian, passive reception of guru's teachings, some minimal criticism allowed
- serious - no independent questioning allowed, some enquiry or freedom but only in asmuch as it doesn't threaten or challenge the so-called guru or so-called teacher, whatever the guru or teacher says must be true, uncritical inquiry as a follower is encouraged.
- extreme - extreme authoritarianism, no freedom, no thinking for oneself, the guru or teacher's or organisation's word is law, no independent enquiry allowed at all, nor even the slightest questioning; only robotic obedience

**Cultism.** Again, here we see loyal devotees willingly participating (with the belssings of their guru); indeed such activities would be impossible without their help. In general Cultism isn't something apart from the above categories, but rather their synthesis. - [more](#)

- authentic spirituality - no attempt to manipulate anyone; just totally being there for the person
- none - teachings and organisation but no coercion
- mild - uncritical worship of guru, us-them view of world ("persecuted elite"), demonisation of critics, seeing one's own group as special and superior to everything else
- moderate - such as [Three Crads trick](#), loaded cliches, independent thinking discouraged, restriction of information
- serious - no free inquiry or independent thinking, thought- and behaviour control, only cultic material, little contact with the outside world, widespread coercion, uncritical devotion to the leader, psychological manipulation, behaviour control, "buddy system", contact with outsiders discouraged, etc
- extreme - ubiquitous thought- and behaviour control, no contact with the outside world, rampant shadow projection. May be physical violence if other things don't work

See Also: [The Guru Test](#) | [Intermediate Zone](#)

### Links

 [The Cult Test](#) (includes detailed commentary) - by A. Orange

