

From Idealization to Finding the Friend

In many spiritual traditions finding a relationship with a teacher is an important path to incorporating aspects of goodness or divine attributes that otherwise might not be considered within the self. Through a consistent relationship with a good, loving teacher, the qualities and manner of the teacher become incorporated into the student.

Goodness is what we long to know inside of ourselves and what we originally experienced in relationship to our caregivers. Through the normal process of identifying with a personality and the usual deficits in parenting we disidentify goodness as being within. Instead the perfection of love and caring seems to be outside of ourselves and to come and go according to the whims of our caregivers. Thus we continue to look for “the presence of good” outside of ourselves.

As Pir Vilayat Khan says: “To become who you are, you have to see yourself in another yourself who is more able to manifest you than yourself! You have it in you, but you have to see it in order to become it, and that is why we are continually looking for ourselves in another our self - in other people. When you see qualities that are present in you in another person, it gives you the courage to be like that. You see that it is actually possible. Otherwise you doubt that you could be like that because it seems too much of an ideal; it does not seem real”

In the best case scenario, the process of idealizing a teacher who embodies aspects of goodness and divine attributes can lead to the incorporation of these qualities for the student. On the other hand, a student may abdicate their power to the idealized teacher perpetuating their cycle of self denigration. In another possibility, the process of idealization may be blocked by the student’s need to protect the wounded self, fearful of disappointment. In using myself as an example, I hope to bring to light some of the difficulties that stop the important work of idealization.

Long have I been aware of my difficulties in idealizing teachers, especially in the alive human form! As a young child I turned to

Jesus and Mary as absolute ideals, but their perfection seemed so unobtainable.

The disparity between Jesus, Mary and myself mirrored the gulf I felt growing up with my mother. She had plans for me and being little; I was incapable of succeeding or even guessing what they were. My mother's perfection and love seemed to be tied to being able to figure out what she needed for support and to perform this action.

I looked for an intermediary to the big ideals, someone I could relate to - the saints. I researched the saints who knew what to do in order to establish a secure and loving relationship with God. I then tried to imitate the ways in which they lived. I found security in this. However, I was continually met with my limitations and a growing sense of inadequacy. The saint would then become as superior and unobtainable to me as my mother, tainting the idealization that had formed.

Idealizing another exposed my sense of inadequacy which was perceived as inherent badness. This wrongness was the early internalized frustration of being asked to meet my mother's needs and not getting mine met. Inevitably, shamed by being unable to do for my mother what she wanted, unable to walk in the footsteps of the saints, I settled for the imperfect relationship with my father, who was available sporadically.

In choosing a path and a teacher in my late 20s, my unconscious desire for a connection with my mother resurfaced. I had recently married and chosen to take initiation. Part of my desire for initiation was to increase the connection between myself and my husband, who was a mureed. I wanted to "be like him" and recreate the comfort I felt in the relationship with my father.

As my marriage dissolved, my Sufi teacher became a lifeline to hope. Perceiving my teacher as embodying love and myself being without this love, I felt separate from her and her goodness. With so many actual miles between us, frustration arose when my attempts to reach out to her were not reciprocated. Ultimately I interpreted her silence as disinterest, being too busy to respond, a familiar distant relationship like the one with my self-absorbed mother.

I remained loyal to the bayat, yet perpetuated the distance to decrease my feelings of frustration and inadequacy. As grace unfolds, I met a psycho-spiritual teacher during this time who taught me to recognize and allow the feelings of my child self. When I was unable to empathize with the child's desire and resulting frustration, she helped me to understand how I turned these feelings against myself into inadequacy. I felt more comfortable in controlling my desire than feeling helpless in my relationship. Eventually the energy of my frustration and desire went into making room for my humanness.

The work led me to research and teach a class Meditating with the Female Mystics, a modern day rectification of my earlier attempts to idealize the saints. In the class I brought forth both the positive qualities of the mystics as well as their human sides. I was "evening the score", balancing the gap between teacher and student by exposing their humanity. A possibility of comradeship between teacher and student emerged where we could both traverse a similar path of worldly conflicts, emotional reactions, disappointments, mistakes. Without including the human side of the mystic, the perceived gulf between the teacher's perfection and my human frailty kept me separate.

In the words of a psychoanalyst, Martha Stark, the more we were able to partake in the perfection of an idealized parent in our past the more we will feel in the present "*I now have my own goals and aspirations; I have my own dreams to pursue, my own potential to realize.*" When we are in an idealizing relationship, one's inner child wants to have the perfect parent she never had. On a soul level we are resonating with someone who is manifesting latent, unseen qualities of our being that are lying as seeds, waiting to sprout and bloom.

Through the idealizing relationship the student or mureed is able to unthaw frozen aspects of their inner child and mature into a sense of being good enough on an ego level and activate a deeper awareness of our spiritual self.

What kept me linked with my Sufi teacher despite all the distance I hid behind, was her personal attunement on a deep spiritual level. The practices that she gave tuned me and facilitated my spiritual unfoldment. This has been an extraordinary blessing in our relationship. She fed my soul even while my ego was afraid to keep wanting what I thought I could not have.

Eventually the spiritual growth with my teacher needed the support of a consistent relationship in my day to day life. I had to let go of the inadequacy and confront the desire I had for closer contact. After 19 years of this dance, I clearly asked my teacher for increased communication and contact. In doing this I faced the possible disappointment that my choice for contact might not be compatible with my teacher's style of working. Instead, my dear teacher held this process and reworked the energy of frustration into an assertive movement towards increased contact.

All the doubting and distancing is being reshaped into a deeper contact with self and teacher. The idealization and accompanying inadequacy still comes to the forefront at times, welcomed now into the relationship. A friendship is emerging.

As Hazrat Inayat Khan says: *"Friendship is a word which we all use in our everyday language, and yet it could take one's whole life only to realize its meaning. However learned a person may be, however pious, spiritual, or experienced, if he has not learned the nature and character of friendship he has not learned anything. This is the first and the last thing we have to learn....to pass this examination of friendship is the most difficult thing in the world."*

What precious gems lie underneath the idealization, if together we unite spiritual practice and open the welcome mat for what the relationship brings. *"For it is not belief in God which leads us to the goal.... It is the friendship of God. For someone who learns the lesson of friendship in this world, this lesson develops in the end into friendship with God."* (Hazrat Inayat Khan)

This is a different path; not the way of psychotherapy, not the guru. This is the path of the friend. In this path, idealization is often the initial spark that brings the mureed to the teacher. Grace and time

unfold the relationship into a new form - the relationship to the friend. Ideally the teacher is the friend who welcomes all aspects of the mureed while being real themselves. Then this relationship bridges the ultimate connection and we find that we have befriended God.

by Zahira Muhi Nadler

With special thanks to my teachers: Murshida Mariam Baker, Radha Conrad and Raphael Birney!