

## **'CRAZY WISDOM' SPIRITUAL TEACHERS**

*'None attains to Ultimate Truth until a thousand  
honest people have called him a heretic'*

*Junaid*

### **Unusual Conduct and Behaviour**

One of the most unusual types of spiritual guide is the 'crazy wisdom' teacher who employs a radical style of teaching designed to shock the conventional mind. Such teachers are masters of surprise, contradiction and ambiguity:

There is a world-wide tradition of spiritual adepts whose behavior and teachings prove shocking to ordinary moral sensibilities and challenge widely held norms of thought and conduct. These are the crazy adepts of Tibetan Buddhism, the eccentric teachers of Ch'an (Zen) and the holy fools of Christianity and Islam, the *avadhutas* and *bauls* of Hinduism and the tricksters and religious clowns of tribal traditions. In order to teach spiritual truths, these masters often adopt quite unconventional means – certainly means that are not ordinarily associated with holy folk. Their generally outrageous behavior does not at all conform to our cherished ideas of religiosity, morality, and sanctity. (1)

The teacher's actions may seem inexplicable to an outsider: "The teacher may appear nonsensical when he is talking or behaving in terms of an extra cognition, imperceptible to the ordinary person."

The behaviour of the teacher may appear at times bizarre, unpredictable or meaningless; he may act in ways that are flippant, domineering, cold, manic or tyrannical, he may scream as though gripped by fury, sit in disapproving silence or set the disciple a flurry of apparently inconsequential tasks. Any outsider might well conclude from his behaviour that he is mad; even the novice may realize only long afterwards what the teacher's true intentions were. (2)

The 'crazy-wisdom' teacher may be seen as the ultimate exemplar of 'indirect teaching' in which the teacher achieves results by oblique action, usually baffling observers. "Disciples suspect the nature of this activity in proportion to their degree of inner perception, but the behaviour of the 'crazed-saint' remains incomprehensible to outside observers." The strange behaviour of a 'crazy-wisdom' teacher may also be understood in the context of part of a developmental process of inner transformation created by the friction set up by the deliberate

creation of an environment of blame and abuse. By enduring opprobrium a person may 'refine' themselves and have their resilience tested.

There is a nascent literature on the behaviour and activities of teachers from many spiritual traditions who fall in the 'crazed-saint' category. (3) Some of their qualities include:

- Supernatural powers
- Healing abilities
- Physical and sexual indulgences
- Takes, redistributes money
- Engages in secret charity
- Goes against the norms of society
- Opposed by orthodox secular and religious authorities
- Attracts followers drawn by the lure of the strange and mysterious
- Makes no attempt to hide or explain their unconventional behaviour
- Employs music, dance, movements and exercises regarded as 'improper' by the orthodox
- Alternates harmony and opposition, piety and impiety
- Spends a great deal of time in both mortification and indulgence – the twin operation of these, their polarity, releases an inner power which can be transmitted to others

A teacher may violate accepted norms of behaviour or the superficial canons of appearance in order to demonstrate to those who are perceptive that conduct alone does not demonstrate interior worth. By attacking the derivative and secondary, a teacher will draw attention to the essential or real element in a situation or event.

In certain situations the behaviour of a 'crazy wisdom' teacher may appear so shocking that it seems to transgress conventional moral standards. It may be virtually impossible to understand such actions unless the true motivation of the teacher is known or perceived. A famous Zen story illustrates this point:

One day, in the monastery of Nan Chuan, the monks of the East and West wing had a dispute over the possession of a cat. They all came to Nan Chuan for arbitration. Holding a knife in one hand and the cat in the other, Nan Chuan said, "If any one of you can say the right thing, this cat will be saved; otherwise it will be cut into two pieces!" None of the monks could say anything. Nan Chuan then killed the cat. In the evening, when senior monk Chao Chou returned to the monastery, Nan Chuan asked him what he would have said had he been there at the time. Chao Chou took off his straw sandals, put them upon his head, and walked out. Whereupon Nan Chuan commented: "Oh, if you had only been there, the cat would have been saved!" (4)

Although spiritual masters generally condemn violence, there may be certain situations where apparently violent behaviour is necessary and appropriate:

All acts of violence are in principle born from egotistical states. An egoless man is therefore, in principle, non-violent. But non-violence should not be turned into a sort of taboo. There are certain definite cases where the use of force, of compulsion, even violence, is imperative. In such cases the egoless man will make use of such force and may apparently act with violence. But it goes without saying that this will be a mere appearance since his action is completely devoid of desire or fear. The non-egotistic man, from his very nature, neutralizes violence and spreads around him the peace which is within him. However, he may be led – I repeat very exceptionally – to employ force, his motivation being pure, that is non-egotistical. (5)

One characteristic of a genuine teacher is the ability to play a ‘role’ appropriate for a given situation. Gurdjieff was a master of role-playing:

Another aspect of Gurdjieff was his ability on the one hand to make himself almost invisible and on the other to make himself appear like one of the Rishis, blazing with energy and radiance. When visitors were being shown around the grounds they would sometimes pass him with only a glance, like an American who was talking to me about what a wonderful man Mr. Gurdjieff must be, and that he would like to meet him. Just then Gurdjieff passed by and went into the house. “That is Mr. Gurdjieff,” I said. “Well,” he replied, “isn’t that queer! I spoke to him in the grounds and thought he was the gardener.” In ordinary life people play roles unconsciously. Gurdjieff played them consciously, and those who worked closely with him usually knew when he was playing a role. In *A Letter to a Dervish* he wrote: “The sign of a perfected man and his particularity in ordinary life must be that in regard to everything happening outside of him, he is able to, and can as a worthy action, perform to perfection externally the part corresponding to the given situation; but at the same time never blend or agree with it.” (6)

Playing a role or pretending to be other than what one really is may be a form of ‘conduct-teaching’ employed in order to illustrate an essential truth. An interesting historical example of such a technique involves the Sufi teacher Hatim of Balkh who was known as ‘The Deaf.’ One day he saw a fly caught in a spider web and spoke to it, for the edification of those present, saying that it had been deceived by something attractive and desirable, but had only managed to get itself caught:

This analogy of the human condition was further given point by the audience when they realized that Hatim’s attention had been attracted to the buzzing of the fly, which other people could hardly hear: and yet it was he who was supposed to be deaf. Hatim explained that he was not deaf at all. He pretended

that he could not hear because then he would not be expected to listen to praise or opposition intended to influence him. If people thought him deaf, those who surrounded him would say what they really thought about him. (7)

A sage may use 'deception' or indirect teaching to obtain a positive result that could not have been attained in any other way:

Q: How can you justify influencing people against their wishes? Can any good come from deception?

A: You could call deception doing something without the knowledge of another person. Well, what about secret charity? What about helping someone while pretending not to? Your idea of deception is likely to be flawed, to say the least; people use these catch-phrases without thinking about them. (8)

The words and actions of a spiritually enlightened individual may be at variance with the norms of society since it is ultimately based on higher understanding and perception of a higher spiritual order. Many realized beings throughout history have been called 'idiots' or 'mad' since this is the only conclusion that an ordinary person can reach about behaviour which is linked with 'something beyond.' According to the Sufi Haidar Gul: *'There is a limit beyond which it is unhealthy for mankind to conceal truth in order not to offend those whose minds are closed.'*

In some cases a teacher may act quickly and paradoxically in a situation based on a higher perception of events. A traditional Sufi teaching tale "The Horseman and the Snake" illustrates this point:

A horseman from his point of vantage saw a poisonous snake slip down the throat of a sleeping man. The horseman realized that if the man were allowed to sleep the venom would surely kill him. Accordingly he lashed the sleeper until he was awake. Having no time to lose, he forced the man to a place where there were a number of rotten apples lying upon the ground and made him eat them. Then he made him drink large gulps of water from a stream. Finally, when he was near to exhaustion, and dusk was falling, the man fell to the ground and vomited out the apples, the water and the snake. When he saw what had come out of him, he realized what had happened, and begged the forgiveness of the horseman. Those who are endowed with knowledge have responsibility. Those who are not, have none beyond what they can conjecture. (9)

A teacher may seem to be unheeding of the feelings of others or otherwise out of step with society. Their actions spring from the fact that they have glimpsed the true character of a situation and have realized that etiquette and proper behaviour are relative to the situation: *'If the house is on fire, you will act accordingly.'*

A direct perception of cause and effect underlies many of the unusual words and actions of 'crazy wisdom' teachers: "Most people have no idea that the most trivial-seeming actions may have extremely far-reaching effects. Only occasionally are cause and effect seen in a short run within a contracted time-scale, giving an equivalence of what we are talking about." A true story with a hidden inner dimension encapsulates this concept:

The French playwright Victorien Sardou was sitting at a table during a dinner when he upset a glass of wine. A lady by his side, to prevent the liquid from staining the cloth, poured salt on it. Spilt salt, to some people, means bad luck. To counteract this, a pinch is thrown over the shoulder, and Sardou did just this. The salt got into the eyes of the waiter who was trying to serve him, and the chicken on a plate which he held fell to the ground. The dog of the house started to gobble the chicken, and a bone lodged in his throat so that it began to choke. The hostess's son tried to get the bone out of the dog's throat. Now the dog turned on the youth and bit his finger so hard that it had to be amputated. The waiter, the dog and the son of the house were all acting automatically, through the secondary self: a mixture of greed, hope, fear and conditioning. Only the woman acted for practical reasons: but her attempt to retrieve the situation was foiled by the playwright, whose second action – throwing the salt over his shoulder – set the whole train of actions going. (10)

### **Unconventional Teaching Techniques**

In some spiritual traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, prospective disciples are exposed to difficult trials and tests before they are accepted as students: "If a teacher did not test a pupil's trust, he or she would be cheating the pupil by pre-empting the pupil's ever-present option to leave." A teacher may test the fortitude of a disciple or use seemingly harsh measures in order to develop higher capacities and perceptions in the student.

Tibetan lamas are well known for confronting spiritual aspirants with any number of fierce tests – not least personal abuse – though perhaps in the interest of preserving their teachings, many have adopted somewhat milder manners with eager Western students. Traditionally, at any rate, the spiritual seeker could expect to pass through a period of trials before being accepted by a Tibetan adept teacher. And after his or her initiation, the disciple was subject to still more severe testing. There is no sanctuary for the ego-personality in spiritual discipleship. The teacher's function is precisely to make all egoic retreat impossible. And some gurus are more ruthlessly surgical in performing this task than others. (11)

One classic method of deterring unsuitable people is to compel them to conclude that the teacher is worthless or insignificant. And sometimes teachers may find it necessary to

deliberately exhibit bizarre behaviour as a means of extricating themselves from difficult situations. This is summed up in the phrase: *'Always be careful to make a bad impression on undesirables.'*

Q: I would like to know if you deliberately set out to affront or discourage people by what might be called dissimulation. Do you, in fact, make some people think that you are not what you really are, in order to get rid of them?

A: You are right. You see, if you try to persuade someone of the truth of what you are saying, you may succeed or you may not. If you succeed, you may have succeeded only in inducing belief, not in communicating usefulness. If you do not succeed, you might as well get rid of the person. If you make them think that you are useless to them, this is kinder than making them think that they have not "passed a test" or anything like that.

Q: Then what are you seeking in people?

A: Capacity to *be*, to serve, to understand. (12)

Sometimes a teacher may play a calculated role in order to create an impression designed to discourage or deflect unsuitable people. Gurdjieff was a master of the technique:

With officials, for example, he could play the role of a simple man, almost devoid of intelligence, and so disarm them. Once, two psychologists from England came to the Prieuré on their way to a conference in Geneva. Gurdjieff gave them a wonderful lunch, but every time they asked him a question he turned it aside with a joke. After lunch he took them for a walk round the grounds and back to the Study house, cracking jokes and behaving like an eccentric. The men were bewildered. When they left his attitude changed. "Now," he said, "they will leave me in peace to pursue my aim." (13)

Some teachers have a reputation for being ill-tempered, due to their primary concern of reaching their objectives rather than caring what others think of them. There is a saying: *'A tactful teacher is no teacher at all.'*

Some people, of course, are so wilful that even if you tell them you are not going to compromise with fixed biases, they will continue to battle. In such cases the teacher will disappoint their expectations by making themselves out to be unsuitable to the student, borrowing from the *Path of Blame* techniques. Even then, the delinquent student may not be able to understand what is going on, and will put all kinds of fanciful interpretations on the matter. (14)

The behaviour of a teacher who possesses unfamiliar knowledge of a higher order may have to accord with the need to communicate such knowledge, and not with the expectations of the student. The teacher will sacrifice his repute, even appear “inconsistent,” for the sake of the effectiveness of the teachings they wish to transmit:

The teacher will seem to be, at different times, impatient, vacillatory, inconsistent, lacking in foresight. His disciples will regularly try to ignore or explain away these techniques (for techniques they undoubtedly are) and in doing so will miss the intended point. In the West, we cannot bear untidiness, lack of answers to questions, absence of a system which we try to find and to cause to work. These things work admirably in ordinary organizations, but according to the observed workings of mystical schools, they are a hindrance. There is an additional barrier. If the alteration of mood, change in circumstances and so on applied by the mentor so powerfully affects the learner that in his ordinary life he ceases to be efficient, he has failed. From the psychological point of view it might be said that the indolent or confusing behaviour of the teacher is a means of testing; but it would seem to me that it is intended to reflect the habits of mind of the students, so that they may learn from them, as much as anything else. (15)

At times teachers may apply a powerful emotional shock to provide experiences conducive to the spiritual ripening and development of a student:

In certain personalities certain shocks are needed to turn the mind out of a groove. The needed shocks come in the form of intense emotional excitement such as anger, indignation, humiliation, etc. Such passions, when incited to a certain degree of intensity, acquire an extraordinary power to break through the limits of consciousness which we generally set for it. In other words, an intense emotional disturbance often awakens in us a mysterious power of which we have ordinarily been unaware. (16)

Anger which is consciously controlled and not the product of emotional reaction may be skilfully applied in certain situations as a teaching device. A teacher may employ anger for dynamic purposes, to challenge or motivate someone, not to harm or humiliate them:

Q: Can anger ever be reaction-free?

A: Yes. There is a divine anger but then it is not really anger. It is a kind of activity that is unrelated to any self-image. From outside it may look like anger but it is not anger. It is completely free from reaction and leaves no residue. The moment the situation is over it completely dissolves. (17)

Certain spiritual traditions have historically used unexpected physical techniques in an effort to test disciples and open their eyes to spiritual truths:

Tokusan (780 – 866), a great monk of the late T'ang Dynasty, was noted for swinging his staff. His favorite saying was, "No matter what you say, whether 'yes' or 'no,' you will get thirty blows just the same." He once gave a sermon in which he said, "If you ask, you are at fault; if you do not, you are also in the wrong." A monk came forward prepared to make his bow, when Tokusan struck him with his staff. The monk protested: "I was just going to bow to you, and why this blow?" "If I waited for you to open your mouth, the blow would be no use whatever," said Tokusan. (18)

The behaviour and methods used by a teacher may seem unusual and at variance with ordinary social conventions. "Some people say that a spiritual teacher should have no emotions or be totally balanced. We say that a spiritual teacher must be a person who *can* be totally balanced, but not one who cannot help but be balanced." The unusual and sometimes bewildering methods employed by a teacher to instruct his or her pupils are a means to an end designed to bypass the logical rational mind:

Contradiction, negation, or paradoxical statement is the inevitable result of the Zen way of looking at life. The whole emphasis of its discipline is placed on the intuitive grasping of the inner truth deeply hidden in our consciousness. And this truth thus revealed or awakened within oneself defies intellectual manipulation, or at least cannot be imparted to others through any dialectic formulas. It must come out of oneself, grow within oneself, and become one with one's own being. What others – that is, ideas or images – can do is to indicate the way where lies the truth. This is what Zen masters do. And the indications given by them are naturally unconventionally free and refreshingly original. As their eyes are always fixed on the ultimate truth itself, anything and everything they can command is utilized to accomplish the end, regardless of its logical condition and consequences. (19)

### **The 'Path of Blame'**

In Sufism, teachers of 'crazy wisdom' are termed 'Malamati' or followers of the 'Path of Blame.' They may find it necessary in their teaching function to incur feelings of opposition in others, in order to challenge fixed ideas and assumptions. The 'Malamati' procedure involves incurring blame for a higher purpose, undermining all ordinary comfortable beliefs that one can judge by appearances: "A Sufi may allow himself to be attacked, to dramatize a situation . . . incurring reproach to illustrate its absurdity, or the shallowness of the attacker, or the superficiality of the audience."

Individuals who follow the 'Malamati' approach do not worry about appearances, image or the impression made on others. They incur reproach, take no care of their reputes, and simply do and say what they consider right. They follow the injunction: '*Enduring the criticism of others may be part of doing good to them.*'

Centuries before the Zen masters in Japan found that you could disarm an opponent by using his strength against him, the Sufis did the same thing with words and appearances. It fitted in well with their contention that so-called 'reality' is in any case comparative, subjective. This is how it works: someone vilifies a Sufi. He answers: "Everything that you say against me is true, and it does not even go far enough. In fact, in the nature of things, you can only have an incomplete idea of how bad I am. I am the one who knows all the secret failings and shortcomings in me, and it is I therefore who am an expert on my iniquity." (20)

Teachers of the 'Malamati' persuasion ('People of Opprobrium') deliberately annoy others and behave badly so that "only the sincere and perceptive among would-be disciples can bear their company." But, they have a higher aim in mind:

Q: You have spoken of the Path of Blame. Can you say more about this?

A: The teacher incurs 'blame.' He may, for instance, attribute a bad action to himself, in order to teach a disciple the way to behave without directly criticizing him. Direct criticism of a bad characteristic cannot always be used to overcome that obstacle. This is where the Malamati expertise comes in. If you say "I have such a bad habit of doing or thinking such and such" you remove the personal aspect and prevent the remark from being fought off or absorbed by the learner's self-esteem. Many people follow the Malamati (blameworthy) behaviour, even making themselves out to be wrongdoers, in order to highlight these characteristics in others. The reason for this is that when a person sees someone saying or doing something, he will tend to judge him by himself. This is what Rumi and others call "holding up a mirror to oneself and calling the image the other person." (21)

One of the most interesting and unusual exemplars of the 'Path of Blame' is the traditional Sufi teaching figure Mulla Nasrudin. One of his favorite sayings is '*Enjoy yourself, or try to learn – you will annoy someone. If you do not – you will annoy someone.*' Mulla Nasrudin is a folk hero of timeless appeal who plays the part of the 'wise fool' and countless other characters in many Sufi teaching stories. His role changes: sometimes he is the sage, sometimes the fool, he may be a courtier, beggar, physician, judge or teacher.

The Nasrudin stories, known throughout the Middle East, constitute one of the strangest achievements in the history of metaphysics. Superficially, most of the Nasrudin stories may be used as jokes. But it is inherent in the

Nasrudin story that it may be understood at any one of many depths. There is the joke, the moral – and the little extra which brings the consciousness of the potential mystic a little further on the way to realization. (22)

Nasrudin's humorous exploits are employed by the Sufis as a teaching device to illustrate the characteristic patterns of human thought and behaviour:

The Mulla is variously described as very stupid, improbably clever, the possessor of mystical secrets. The Sufis, who believe that deep intuition is the only real guide to knowledge, use these stories almost like exercises. They ask people to choose a few which especially appeal to them, and to turn them over in the mind, making them their own. Teaching masters of the dervishes say that in this way a breakthrough into a higher wisdom can be affected. (23)

Mulla Nasrudin frequently appears in Sufi teaching stories as a comic figure: "Humour cannot be prevented from spreading; it is a way of slipping through the patterns of thought which are imposed upon mankind by habit and design." Nasrudin's words and actions are often inexplicable and may appear mad to the onlooker:

One Nasrudin story, showing how the right result comes for the Sufi through a special mechanism ('the wrong method' to the uninitiated), explains much of the seeming eccentricities of Sufis:

Two men came before Nasrudin when he was acting in his capacity as a magistrate. One said, "This man has bitten my ear – I demand compensation." The other said, "He bit it himself." Nasrudin adjourned the case and withdrew to his chambers. There he spent half an hour trying to bite his own ear. All that he succeeded in doing was falling over in the attempt, and bruising his forehead. Then he returned to the courtroom. "Examine the man whose ear was bitten," he ordered. "If his forehead is bruised, he did it himself, and the case is dismissed. If not, the other one did it, and the bitten man is compensated with three silver pieces." The right verdict had been arrived at by seemingly illogical methods. Here Nasrudin arrived at the correct answer, irrespective of the apparent logic of the situation. In another story, himself adopting the role of fool ("the Path of Blame," to the Sufi), Nasrudin illustrates, in extreme form, ordinary human thinking:

Someone asked Nasrudin to guess what he had in his hand. "Give me a clue," said the Mulla. "I will give you several," said the wag. "It is shaped like an egg, egg-sized, looks, tastes and smells like an egg. Inside it is yellow and white. It is liquid within before you cook it, coalesces with heat. It was moreover, laid by a hen . . ." "I know!" interrupted the Mulla. "It is some sort of cake." (24)

## Misuse of Unorthodox Methods

Unconventional teaching techniques can only be carried out successfully by those with the requisite knowledge to apply the method correctly. "The temptation to apply the technique in a mass form is one which characterizes 'strayed' or small-potential instructors. Malamati behaviour can only be used with great care." One of the marks of a real teaching is that an actual inner development follows teaching practices that involve deliberate obfuscation and bewilderment. The student actually benefits from the experience.

Many unconventional methods have been taken out of context or copied mechanically with predictable results. The use of techniques such as deliberate and controlled anger can easily be misused and must be applied very carefully and precisely to be effective:

Because Zen enlightenment is ultimately beyond words, teachers have been known to use other means of communicating impressions. Among the more dramatic of their techniques were various shock tactics. Surprising blows and shouts, for example, are known to have been employed by some ancient Zen masters to produce specific effects in the minds of seekers. These devices are also known to have been widely mimed. Thus they were transformed into forms of pretence and mystification. (25)

Although unorthodox teaching techniques are open to abuse, it is important not to dismiss them out of hand without first trying to understand why they are being applied and in what context:

It is natural enough that we should feel offended by some of the escapades of crazy-wisdom masters. But instead of taking the easy option of righteous indignation, wholesale condemnation, or angry retaliation for our offended sensibilities, our first obligation is to cultivate the light of understanding, including self-understanding. In some cases, however, a crazy-wisdom teacher may well have been guilty of overzealousness and misjudgment that caused harm to another human being. This raises serious questions about the appropriateness and usefulness of crazy-wisdom teachings in our time, and also about the moral and criminal liability of teachers who work in this manner. (26)

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