

# The Master and the Acolyte

I.J. Singh\*

\* Professor of Anatomy, New York University, 345 East 24th St. New York. NY 10010 (USA).  
Email: ijs1@nyu.edu

In over 30 years of being a professor, I have always been astonished, sometimes even stunned, by the yawning gap between what I thought I was teaching and what the students showed they had learned. My students are not kids; they are mature young men and women with college degrees, ranging in age from 22 to the early Forties; and they are some of the brightest minds I have known. What I teach is not rocket science, or so esoteric a philosophy where the mind might spin, but simply human anatomy. Sometimes it is complex, other times its minute details are overpowering; but it has nothing that could not be mastered with some honest effort, perseverance and a modicum of intelligence. At times, however, the students come back to me with something they claim I said in a lecture that is so complex it takes my breath away.

One morning, all of a sudden a light bulb went on in my head and I realized that I am not alone in my frustration. I saw that it is an age-old and universal problem that will never really go away. This moment of my epiphany occurred while talking to a friend about the Sikh Gurus and their message that we call Sikhism. It was never a complicated, undecipherable message, but one that was communicated in the easily understood vernacular of the people. This message we call *Guru-vani* did not have a hurried passage; it was elaborated and delivered over a span of two centuries.

Yet the abyss between the message and its perception is astounding. It is the same phenomenon that sets teachers and students against each other, parents and children at each other's throats. What the mind does not know or is not quite ready to accept, the eye does not see and the ear does not hear. Moreover, between hearing and listening, there is a world of difference. Both in the process of transmission and with the passage of time, the essential meaning of the message often gets garbled. Look at the game that little children often play. In it, one child thinks of a short statement that he whispers to the one next to him, who tells it to the third child and so forth; the message goes through many mouths and ears until it comes back full circle. The result is often a statement entirely different and transformed from what it was when its journey started.

**Prophet Mohammed founded Islam – the way of peace and submission to God. He fought when war was thrust upon him. Then how could his followers interpret his words to consign all non-Muslims to damnation as *kafirs*? How can his followers stone women, condemn heretics to death and conclude that terrorism against civilian non-combatants constitutes religious war? Jesus is celebrated all over the world as the Prince of Peace. What better demonstration of a heart and mind at peace can there be than his willingness to be nailed unresistingly to the cross? Then what are his followers thinking when they diminish other faiths as untrue, and think that inquisition and crusades against innocent people glorify God or Jesus, that virtue lies in burning women as witches, igniting crosses on the houses of those that are racially different, lynching people, or consigning non-Christians to hell or limbo?**

Now, look at the Sikh religion, history and practice. It is an over 500-year old tradition and the gap between precept and practice may not appear to be so glaring, but it is, nevertheless, there. The Fifth Guru, Guru Arjun, accepted martyrdom, as did the Ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur, for the principle of religious freedom, and for protecting the rights of others to be able to practice their own religion as they saw fit. **When the Sikh Gurus picked up**

**weapons, they did so only when war was thrust upon them, and after they had exhausted all alternative peaceful means of resolution.** If I were to recount Sikh sacrifices and martyrdoms - accepted peacefully and willingly for freedom of religion or nation - this essay would become an encyclopedia. So, how is it that in the 1980s some Sikh youth turned violent?

Before my Sikh friends take umbrage at my charge above, I would ask them to pause for a moment. **I know that the violence in Punjab in the 1980s was initiated and driven by the injustices of the government, and there was a million times more state-terrorism than Sikh terrorism at any time.** I know as well that many of these so-called 'Sikh terrorists' were in fact Indian government agents masquerading as Sikh separatists, hell bent on fragmenting India. Also, I am aware that many Sikh terrorists were propelled by desperation and the very justified conclusion in the India of that time (the decades of the 1980s) that justice was not available at any price. Yet, I look at those days and I see some dramatic departures from the teachings of the Guru-founders of Sikhism, and not just in the Sikh terrorists, who looted and killed innocent civilians.

When I see female infanticide and feticide in Punjab, many of those guilty of these crimes against humanity are Sikhs, although they are not the only people who are so guilty. And don't tell me about the social or economic desperation that drives them to it. When Sikhs withhold equal rights from women in their homes and religious practices, while at the same time preaching to the world how Sikh teaching is entirely non-sexist, non-manipulative, non-exploitive and gender-neutral, don't tell me that it is because of cultural constraints. Those are excuses, not reasons.

The Masters (Gurus) taught us a life of justice, truth and compassion. We have created a society that is only sporadically just, largely deceptive and minimally compassionate. It reminds me of the wag who once said, "**There is nothing wrong with Christianity, it just hasn't been tried yet.**" The same truth applies to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, or to any other faith. Indeed, no human movement, religious or secular, is exempt from this; look at Communism as an example. Sikhism gave us a teaching that is entirely iconoclastic. So we turned the message on its head and made icons of the founders of the faith. The trouble is that when exploring the teachings of the masters, we see only what we want to see; we hear only what we want to hear.

It is true that all learners stand on the shoulders of giants, in that whatever they have become could not have been done without the foundation laid by those who preceded them. It is also equally true that in time, a pupil must surpass the teacher. The most successful child is one that can outdo the parent. The new edition of a book has to be better than the old, or else it is at best just a reprint. That is the only way progress can be made. The original ideas, however, must be kept as free as possible from distortion. An unquestioning acolyte does not make a good student.

But the lesson permeates only as far as we let it. The master shows how to live honestly and die with dignity; the acolyte learns how to exploit others and kill without remorse.

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