

Discipleship and Disillusionment

John Nash

Summary

A student may engage in esoteric work for many years, consistently demonstrating commitment, selflessness and detachment, only to be confronted by the devastating sense that the work no longer has meaning and value. Plunged into deep depression, guilt, sense of failure—even anger—the student desperately seeks answers, guidance and new direction.

This article explores what may be a more common situation than we have supposed. It seeks to understand the causes of such crises and develop ways to deal with them. Among the possible causes is crystallization of the forms through which the esoteric work has been expressed. Perhaps the disciple is being guided to new areas of work. The article is addressed both to disciples who may be experiencing crises and to counselors to whom they may turn for help. Both must avoid condemnation and blame and instead show compassion, patience and understanding. The hope and expectation is that the individual will emerge from the crisis with new wisdom and once again will become a productive disciple.

The Ideal and Reality

The ideal portrayed by esoteric schools and eagerly embraced by every new student is someone who maintains a rhythm of spiritual discipline, including daily meditation; reads and re-reads the literature of the particular esoteric system, discovering new meaning each time; and selflessly devotes his or her life to group service of steadily increasing responsibility. With superb detachment and humility, the disciple labors on cheerfully through every challenge. No matter how much the individual shuns the spotlight and downplays the significance of his or her work, that individual shines as a role model for co-workers at every stage of development. The disciple is progressing to

ever higher levels of consciousness, in communion with and encouraging countless others sensitive to the same vibration. Most of us know, or at least have heard of, individuals who express that worthy ideal. The world is truly blessed by their lives.

We probably also know people who, after years of dedicated work, suddenly withdraw into the shadows. Unable to understand what has happened, plunged into deep depression, wracked by guilt, and sometimes consumed by anger, these individuals desperately seek answers and guidance. Sadly, they often have nowhere to turn. Perhaps, to a greater or lesser degree, we ourselves are experiencing such a crisis but are reluctant to confide in friends or colleagues because of shame, or because we fear that to reveal our plight would undermine their commitment. Or perhaps we are still in a state of denial, knowing in our hearts that something is seriously wrong but refusing to acknowledge it.

Individuals who have been involved in esoteric work for many years, particularly those engaged in discipleship training, face many challenges, external and internal. The external challenges may be daunting, but in most cases they are easy to understand. They may even enhance the disciple's resolve to climb the highest mountain and conquer the fiercest enemy. The internal ones, by contrast, are more subtle and have the potential to undermine the whole basis of the work. The Spanish mystic John of the Cross described periods of aridity

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in his spiritual life, giving them the picturesque name “dark nights of the soul.”¹ Those dark nights, sometimes stretching out into dark winters, were periods when he was filled with doubts about the validity of the path and about his own worthiness and commitment. Every student is warned to expect such periods of aridity and is reminded that the darkest night is always followed by day, and the coldest winter by spring. Students who have been on the path for a number of years have usually weathered many such periods. They are regarded as tests of the person’s moral fiber and commitment.

We do not know how severe the crises were that John of the Cross faced. Crises vary in intensity, and good judgment must obviously be used to avoid overreaction. But the types addressed in this article are serious.

They are situations in which individuals recognize that their paths have become meaningless; long-studied teachings have lost their power; meditation has become difficult or impossible; and customary service activities are resented or neglected altogether. The experience is not just a phase in the normal ebb and flow of psychological health; it has all the characteristics of permanency. It is accompanied by profound disillusionment with the very essence of the esoteric principles to which the individual had dedicated his or her life. The state of depression may be as deep-seated as the enthusiasm and fulfillment that marked earlier stages on the path.

Sense of Failure

Those who have been in discipleship training may also experience considerable guilt.

Manuals of discipleship training, especially those communicated by the masters, stress the urgency of the work to be undertaken and the dire need for trained workers. The notion that “every pair of hands counts” puts considerable pressure on people sensitive and responsive to the need. Few disciples today work alone. Emphasis has shifted in recent decades to group service, and the individual is likely to feel considerable guilt about letting down the team. Whether or not dropouts are criticized by co-workers, they come under intense self-criticism.

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For disciples knowledgeable of the Planetary Hierarchy and who have responded to its call, guilt will stem from a perceived inability to contribute to the ashram’s work and a corresponding betrayal of the master’s trust. After all, when chelas are admitted to the ashram, the master invests much energy in them and takes appreciable risk, exposing the ashram to the possibility that the newcomers might “harm the group... or be antagonistic to the Master’s vibration.”²

Alternatively, the guilt may stem from a sense of having failed to meet the schedule offered, implied or demanded by the particular esoteric system. We sometimes read that spiritual opportunities are offered once in a lifetime, and that missed opportunities are lost forever. The schedule may be for the expansion or intensification of service or for the expansion of consciousness, including the attainment of specified milestones. The occult literature identifies series of initiations: graded expansions of consciousness, available to peo-

ple in ashramic service—or, at least in the past, available to those pursuing their own spiritual development. The goal in humanity's present stage of development, albeit in the far distant future for most of us, is attainment of master- or adeptship:

[C]oncentrated and persistent pursuit of the ideal of perfection quickens the processes of growth. If continued with complete steadfastness, such a pursuit hastens the achievement of adeptship or perfection through successive initiations.³

But no matter where we ourselves might be now, the point is often made that humanity is in a period of history when accelerated development is possible and initiations can be attained more rapidly than would ordinarily be possible. The literature, or at least our reading of it, may suggest that any self-respecting person should be on a fast track and be checking off initiations, perhaps even more than one in a given lifetime—in this lifetime.

Pitfalls in Esoteric Work

Esoteric organizations have not infrequently been criticized for the emphasis placed on initiation and for the creation of an environment in which members competed with one another in their claims—valid or more likely invalid—to have “taken” prestigious initiations. It is sad that such abuses may have occurred. But let us assume that the disciple-in-crisis has moved beyond the propensity for such inappropriate attitudes and behavior. The attainment of an initiation is understood to be a matter of the utmost confidentiality to be discussed only with a trusted spiritual adviser, or with the master himself in one of those rare, life-changing encounters. Any suggestion of competitiveness is unthinkable; the responsible disciple does not compare him- or herself with others whose karma and dharma are unknown. But what about the person's own expectations?

We are told that the first three initiations are marked by definite memories of a ritual in the presence of the officiating hierophant. These initiations “have always to be taken when in a physical body and upon the physical plane, thus demonstrating initiate consciousness through both mind and brain.”⁴ We also un-

derstand that “in a group of disciples... the large majority have already taken the first initiation [and] many, many lives can elapse between the first initiation and the second—long, long interludes of silent and almost unapparent growth.”⁵

So perhaps the disciple attained the first initiation in a previous life; but what about the second, third, and later ones? Is the present lifetime one of “unapparent growth” or no growth at all? Not being aware of an initiation would suggest that the individual did not attain one. At a time when everyone else is perceived to be advancing steadily on the initiatory path, perhaps the disciple falls into that sorry category of well-intentioned but deluded individuals with unrealistic expectations:

Many people are regarded as initiates who are only endeavoring to be initiate. They are not, however, real initiates. They are those well meaning people whose mental understanding outruns the power of their personalities to practice. They ... are working towards the goal. They are mentally in touch with the ideal and with the Plan. They are aware of forces and energies utterly unknown to the majority. Their only mistake is in the realm of time, for they affirm prematurely that which some day they will be.⁶

Or perhaps everything the disciple has been taught about the initiatory path is untrue. The prospect that the teachings studied for so long might be false could be even more threatening than personal failure. The individual probably outgrew the religious beliefs of his or her early life. The day came when it became clear that those beliefs, while not necessarily false, were simplistic, comprising a partial view of a much larger truth. The abandonment of religious faith may have provoked a crisis not unlike the kind currently under discussion.⁷ But since then the disciple discovered the larger truth. He or she felt privileged and blessed to have found the way into a select group entrusted with teachings of a higher order. If these teachings cannot be relied upon, where else is there to go? Such a perception can evoke not just guilt but anger, a sense of betrayal.

Recuperation

Clearly, disciples who experience crises of disillusionment may simply be learning much-needed lessons in overcoming glamour, illusion and spiritual ambition. But this does not always seem to be the case. Numerous cases indicate that even people who have been conscious of, and careful to avoid, the pitfalls—disciples who have devoted years to selfless, detached esoteric work—can experience devastating crises. Indeed the numbers seem to be growing.

Hopefully the disciple will summon up the courage to confide in a trusted co-worker or spiritual counselor. Conventional psychics are unlikely to be of help because the disciple has moved in consciousness beyond the personality levels to which psychics have access. But a good counselor will have intuitive ability of a higher order and may be able to discern the underlying causes and suggest possible solutions. The counselor must handle the situation in a nonjudgmental and compassionate manner. At a time when the individual is already wracked by deep depression, disillusionment and guilt, the last thing he or she needs to be told is that the crisis was brought on by personal failure, faulty attitudes or unrealistic expectations.⁸ Nor should the individual be told to “snap out of it,” or “pull yourself together!”

The support of loved ones—and in the present context that primarily means co-workers—is urgently needed. Co-workers can play an important role in the individual’s recovery and rehabilitation. It is natural that they will feel the loss of a valued colleague. However they must set aside feelings of having been abandoned or betrayed. Co-workers who are fortunate enough to not be experiencing a crisis, need to be supportive of the one who is, however little they may understand why it has happened.

The disciple-in-crisis must also be nonjudgmental and compassionate toward him- or herself. Where there is some measure of “guilt,” there must be self-forgiveness. Self-criticism must be avoided or deferred until later. Typically, the individual does not understand what is going on any more than co-workers do. He

or she needs rest, time to recuperate, and an opportunity to regain a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Rest does not necessarily mean idleness, which might simply result in brooding. Physical activity may be appropriate, in which the energy previously put into esoteric work can be grounded, while the mind is allowed to relax and become receptive to soul impressions. And here we assume that the soul will act as a clearing house for impressions from senior disciples or other guides to whom supervision of the individual’s work may have been entrusted. To rest may be as valid a stage in the disciple’s development as the long period of active work that has come to an end. While everything currently looks gloomy, the sky may soon clear and the disciple will see the present situation in its proper light.

With or without outside help, the individual may emerge from depression, shake off the dust, and return to the meditation practices, study, and service activities undertaken in the past. On the other hand the crisis may be a sign that the work is no longer necessary or appropriate. It is important that the disciple and/or counselor set aside all expectations of what the final outcome may be—except the expectation and the affirmation that things will work out for the best.

Meditation

Meditation can take many forms, not necessarily requiring regular daily sessions. In the past it may have been beneficial, even essential, for the person to use a particular form of scripted meditation and commit to a daily rhythm. But the time may have come when that form of meditation is no longer useful or effective. Quiet reflection, stillness and silence may be more beneficial for a while. To discontinue long-used meditation practices is not to deny that they ever had purpose or value. Meditation exercises are important not so much in themselves as in the degree to which they help open up conscious links between the personality and higher aspects of our being. Meditation also serves to place us in right relationship to the world and the lives around us.

Perhaps the disciple-in-crisis is being led to another form of meditation or to some other way to communicate with the higher self. Music, art, dance, manual labor, walking in the woods, standing by the seashore, or something else may take its place, enabling the individual to advance in ways that would otherwise have been impossible. In any event, for someone who has meditated for years, the links may already be open and are unlikely to be shut down. The soul may be able to send energy and impressions to the brain at any time during the day or night.

Service

In the overall scheme of things, one person's contribution to the "ashram's work," for a period of weeks, months or even years, may or may not be significant. The ability to serve varies over time according to opportunity as well as to the disciple's state of consciousness. There may be times when we cannot serve as we would like to. But then again it is not for us to judge the impact or significance of what we have

done in the past or can do now. Judgments of that nature must be left those whose vision is greater than our own. Furthermore, "service" covers a wide range of activities. How often have we heard students say something like: "I don't have time for service because I'm a single parent caring for four children and a mother with Alzheimer's." It is unlikely that an individual whose life has been dedicated to esoteric work will stop serving in any way. The disciple will find new ways to serve, shifting, for instance, from working in a soup kitchen to spending time with a lonely relative or with nursing-home residents. Even small acts of service may meet a critical need at the time they are provided.

Importantly, none of us was ever expected to implement Hierarchical Purpose single-handedly. Certainly, we would not want to shirk our responsibilities; but we do not work alone, and many tasks can be undertaken later or done by others. Even the most-valued player on a team can take time out or be sidelined by sickness or injury. Perhaps, after a period of rest, the disciple will return and pick up where he or she left off, with renewed strength—even with greater wisdom and un-

derstanding of the work. On the other hand, the person may never go back to the same work; and that may be perfectly appropriate too. One way or another, essential tasks will get done.

We have only a limited grasp of Hierarchical work; even the most advanced of us only works on the fringe of an ashram. To believe that we understand the master's intent, even as it might relate to ourselves, betrays dangerous arrogance.

What is assumed to be the ashram's mission

may in fact be only a small part of the total effort, or it might now have a lower priority than hitherto. The disciple may have been guided to stop what he or she was doing in order to be groomed for tasks more closely aligned with future ashramic purpose. Perhaps the individual is simply being redirected to some other kind of work in order to gain new experience.

Teachings

Esoteric teachings are dispensed to serve the needs of particular groups of people at particular points in time. A body of teachings is tailored to the prevailing concerns, beliefs, phi-

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osophical mindset, scientific knowledge, and opportunities. Truths are explained in ways that can be comprehended and acted upon then and there. Also, over time, certain truths may be emphasized and others played down. In a dynamic world environment, such as the early 21st century, an explanation or emphasis that was appropriate 50 years ago may be less appropriate today—and might be quite inappropriate in another 50 years. Alternative bodies of teachings may even be given concurrently, each with its own emphasis, purpose, and intended audience. Each body of teachings represents a portion—possibly a very small portion—of that universal, eternal Truth whose content and significance only a Logos can grasp.

If teachings studied for many years become sterile or meaningless, that may be a sign that the individual needs to explore some other area of knowledge. Perhaps he or she has learned as much as is possible from those teachings at the present stage of development. Now a different perspective may be appropriate, a different approach to truth. No master, like the Master Morya, who dictated the *Agni Yoga* books, or the Master Djwhal Khul who dictated the books of Alice Bailey, would ever consent to his teachings becoming dogma, which people question at their peril.⁹ Rather, the masters of wisdom understand our questioning, our need from time to time to stand back, reflect on what has been learned, or explore contrasting teachings. Perhaps for the next several months or years the individual should study Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Huna, Jewish mysticism, academic philosophy, the humanities, mathematics, medicine, finance, the natural environment, or world poverty. The ashram may urgently need an expert in one of those fields and does not have one.

At some time in the future the student may return to the original teachings with new perspectives, along with new ability to put them to good use. Esoteric knowledge is of questionable value unless it can be expressed in service. Alternatively, perhaps the student is being led permanently—to the extent that we can use that term—to a more comprehensive body of teachings.

The Way Forward

Some factors that can provoke spiritual crises of the type under consideration have already been mentioned. Another factor may be declining health or adverse external circumstances. Yet another may be the increasing influence of the disciple's soul ray, requiring a shift toward esoteric work more closely related to that ray. Crises often are just the physical manifestation of events taking place at higher levels of our being.

By why could the process not have been more gradual and orderly? Why did it have to be so unexpected and traumatic? One possible answer is that the disciple's very commitment to the esoteric work may have stifled early warning signs that would otherwise have been apparent. The forms through which the work was expressed may have become crystallized to the point where, lacking flexibility, they had to be destroyed to allow the indwelling life to expand and grow.

Whatever the reasons, the advice to the individual should be to relax, live in the moment, and await soul guidance. During the period of reflection and recuperation, the individual should avoid specific expectations. It is just as inappropriate to say: "I am giving myself three months off and then will return to the work of the last 20 years," as to say: "Under no circumstances will I ever return to it." The future must be a clean slate on which the soul can write whatever it wants to tell us. Otherwise the underlying—and largely unconscious—processes of reflection and regeneration cannot take place.

Disciples-in-crisis may feel moved to make dramatic statements of the end of an era by disposing of books or artifacts linked to the esoteric system to which they were committed. They may even be tempted to make far-reaching—and potentially regrettable—lifestyle changes. Precipitous actions of that kind may have short-term therapeutic value, but caution is a better strategy. Better to put the books in storage than to discard irreplaceable reference sources. Better to take temporary leave from a teacher, service group, or

institution than to burn bridges which would be hard to rebuild. Better to not quit one's job or leave home. Longer-term decisions can be made later.

On the other hand, it may be wise for the disciple to take a leave of absence from an esoteric institution whose teachings now seem meaningless or through which he or she now feels unable to serve. Continued active involvement is likely to be unproductive and could exacerbate feelings of failure, guilt or resentment. Trying to serve under those circumstances might do more harm than good. Particular types of service may have been recommended by teachers or encouraged by the institution; but there may be alternatives that do not carry as much psychological baggage.

Whatever the circumstances, service should never be undertaken with the objective of spiritual growth; it must never be made into a tool of self-interest. To quote Jiddu Krishnamurti: "[Y]ou must give yourself to the service of the world because you love it, and cannot help giving yourself to it."¹⁰

The chief executive officer of a multinational corporation once said that an enterprise should not view profit as its ultimate goal. If the enterprise employs motivated employees to produce and sell high-quality, useful products to satisfied customers, profits will come naturally and automatically. Similarly, spiritual progress should never be allowed to become a goal; it must be understood as a by-product of everything else we do. Whether or not we have correctly understood the notion of an initiatory path, or indeed whether or not it has been correctly taught, where we might be on that path is not our concern. At the end of the present lifetime we may find out that we have attained an initiation, but meanwhile the matter should be of no interest to us.

We should never become attached to a particular esoteric system—still less should we confuse it with the Plan, Purpose or Divine Will. Reality is bigger than any system of teachings, any esoteric school, and any understanding we or anyone else might have of ultimate human purpose. Even to reject an esoteric path entirely does not mean the end of spiritual

growth; instead it may mean the beginning of far greater and more rapid growth.

The disciple-in-crisis must strive to release any feelings of regret or anger. The esoteric path which he or she previously followed was not wrong; it may simply not be the right one for the next few years. The very worst that can happen—a very unlikely scenario—is that the individual will make no further progress in this lifetime. Even then, in a future life the soul would pick up where it left off. Writing from her perspective in the western esoteric tradition, Dion Fortune reminded us: "[W]hat is acquired is never lost... In each life we quickly recapitulate the progress we have made... when the tomorrow of a new incarnation dawns."¹¹

Having said that, it will be incumbent on the individual, sooner or later, to evaluate his or her life and to decide what use is to be made of the available opportunities. It is one thing to conclude that an esoteric system, a set of teachings, or particular types of service have become inappropriate; it is quite another to sink into permanent idleness, indifferent to the many needs that press on us from every side. A spiritual crisis can be devastating; but at some point an individual must decide whether he or she wants to play the role of the eternal victim or to step forward with added wisdom onto a new path. Someone trained in discipleship work who declines to use that training to make the world a better place is a tragic loss to all concerned.

The most likely outcome is that, after a period of recuperation, reflection and searching, the disciple will be led to an area of worthwhile esoteric work which will afford opportunities to apply acquired skills, knowledge and wisdom to the implementation of Hierarchical Purpose. Under soul guidance, appropriate forms of meditation, study and service will emerge. The new endeavors may turn out to be more successful and useful than anything the disciple was engaged in before the crisis.

New Realism

The feeling of disappointment and failure, when a phase of life comes to an end, may

be as great as the time, energy and enthusiasm previously invested in it. This is as true of the collapse of esoteric work as it is of a business failure, an election defeat, or a divorce. But life is a *process*, and all crises are best handled by reflecting on the opportunities now provided rather than on what may have been lost or what the final outcome may be. Socrates was condemned by the people of Athens and forced to take his life; Winston Churchill was voted out of office after leading his nation to victory in World War II; Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a fellow Hindu; Jesus was crucified after preaching love, healing and peace. These were tragic endings, but the lives of those individuals still changed the world. Other people lived, served, and grew in wisdom only to spend their last years in poverty, loneliness, shame, or disdain by the societies they served. In some cases their contribution was eventually recognized, and their place in history assured. But the contributions of countless individuals were never—and never will be—acknowledged.

We should never live and work in expectation of recognition or even in the hope that we shall look back on our lives—at least while still in personality embodiment—with satisfaction. Instead, we should rejoice in the opportunity to live, work, experience and grow. Whether that opportunity lasts a lifetime or only for a few years, the joy should be the same. It does not matter whether the opportunity comes early or late in life, or how long it lasts. If glorious martyrdom is the goal, we may discover that our “crucifixion” is not on a cross but in prison, a homeless shelter, or a psychiatric facility. An advantage of these latter is that we may still be able to do useful work while we are there. As the Existentialists were fond of pointing out, no matter how dire the circumstances, we still make choices.¹²

Discipleship work is an opportunity and a privilege. And it is something that we only partially understand. We are guided to particular types of work, and later we may be guided elsewhere. A necessary part of the process is the surrender of expectations and will to higher purpose. This is the essence of spiritual indifference. We agree to serve and be used—or

not used—as higher powers may see fit. It is not for us to protest that our capabilities are not being fully utilized, or are no longer being utilized. Nor is it our place to insist that we only undertake particular types of work. The masters will not pander to our petty ambitions or conceits.

We embark upon esoteric work in the hope that we can contribute in some small way to the greater good. Yes, we make a commitment to ourselves, to humanity, and to the Planetary Hierarchy; and that commitment is not to be taken lightly. But we must be flexible and allow for our commitment to be expressed not just in what we may be doing now, or what we were doing in the past, but in some completely new direction.

We learn from our experiences, and we carry forward the fruits of that experience to endeavors later in this life and in future ones. Therein lies the basis of our self-worth that may be shaken by a crisis but can never be completely destroyed.

¹ John of the Cross. *Dark Night of the Soul*. Image Books, 1959, p. 156.

² Alice A. Bailey. *Letters on Occult Meditation*. Lucis, 1922, pp. 270-271.

³ Geoffrey Hodson. *The Call to the Heights*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1975, p. 14. Adeptship is the fifth major initiation. The five initiations are compared, in Christian occultism, to the birth, baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Alice A. Bailey. *Discipleship in the New Age*, I. Lucis, 1944 p. 95.

⁵ Alice A. Bailey. *Discipleship in the New Age*, I. Lucis, 1944 p. 94.

⁶ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Psychology*, II. Lucis, 1942, p. 13.

⁷ Consider for example Elie Wiesel’s reaction to witnessing the atrocities of a Nazi death camp: “I was the accuser, God was the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without Love or Mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long.” *Night*. Hill and Wang, 1972/2006, p. 68.

Wiesel survived the holocaust and went on to earn the Nobel Peace Prize.

⁸ Have we not all heard of cancer patients who have been told that they brought the condition upon themselves by sin, or at least by negative thinking?

⁹ See the Foreword to the books of Alice A. Bailey, Lucis Publishing Company.

¹⁰ Jiddu Krishnamurti. *At the Feet of the Master*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1908, p. 16.

¹¹ Dion Fortune. *The Training and Work of an Initiate*. Aquarian Press, 1930, p. 31.

¹² For example, Jean Paul Sartre criticized fellow French people who retreated into inaction during the Nazi occupation, claiming impotence in the face of overwhelming odds.

