



sex and the
spiritual
teacher

why it happens, when it's a problem,
and what we all can do

by Scott Edelstein

Introduction by Mic Hunter • Afterword by Anne Katherine



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Chapter 1

Five Narrow Views

Sexual Misconduct: A Long and Thriving Tradition

The problem of spiritual teachers seducing or sexually abusing their students tarnishes every spiritual tradition, in seemingly every culture—and recorded cases go back many hundreds of years. These misdeeds damage the lives of women and men, children and adults, the rich and the poor, the foolish and the wise, the gullible and the discerning.

A list of spiritual teachers who have committed sexual transgressions during the past few decades reads almost like a Who's Who of modern spiritual figures, and includes priests, ministers, rabbis, gurus, yogis, roshis, senseis, swamis, lamas, maggids, and imams. Sometimes their misconduct involves other transgressions as well (misappropriation of money, physical or emotional abuse, attempted brainwashing, etc.) This widespread misconduct has created scandal after scandal for these teachers, and much suffering for their students and spiritual communities.

With very few exceptions, each of these teachers is or was male;*

*I do not mean to suggest that female spiritual teachers don't commit sexual misdeeds. Some do. It is also a huge mistake to think that female spiritual teachers do not routinely struggle with the temptation to have sex with their students. Still, it does appear that sexual misconduct is far more common among male spiritual teachers.

each offered something genuinely worthwhile to their students; each knew that sex with their students could have potentially damaging consequences for those students; and each—including those teachers raised in other cultures—understood that the prevailing social norms prohibited such sexual relationships. Many of these teachers were married, and thus had vows of fidelity to uphold, as well as (presumably) willing sexual partners. Some had taken vows of celibacy. So why did they act against the best interests of their students, their own spiritual communities, and, ultimately, themselves?

There are five commonly accepted answers to this question. They are deeply divergent, and in some cases mutually exclusive:

1. These transgressions are rare exceptions—the outcomes of a few troubled teachers' psychological problems.
2. Men are pigs. Whether they're spiritual teachers, college professors, or plumbers, men just can't keep their pants zipped up.
3. Spiritual teachers are all frauds who delude others, themselves, or both.
4. The misconduct is not about sex, but power. The spiritual teachers are power junkies, and sex is simply a means of exercising their power.
5. The previous four positions are all bogus. The teacher and the student are both consenting adults who are responsible for their own actions. These so-called transgressions are legitimate, consensual relationships.

In this book I argue that *all five* of these explanations are largely off the mark. In part this is because each one lumps all sexual trans-

In multiple studies by Kenneth Pope, Jacqueline Bouhoutsos, and Peter Rutter, 96% of helping professionals who had sex with their clients, patients, or students were male. Some prominent psychologists believe this asymmetry may be at least somewhat exaggerated, in much the same way that early studies of sexual abuse by Catholic priests "revealed" that few of their victims were male. Nevertheless, even if the actual number of female teachers who had sex with their students were five times higher than studies show, they would still make up only 24% of the total.

gressions together, as if they were variations on a single consistent theme (which they are not); in part it is because they assume that all transgressing teachers share a single personality profile (which, of course, they don't).

In fact, as we look closely, we will see that there are three distinct types of spiritual teachers who lose their way: *exploiters*, *errants*, and *exceptionalists*. In Chapter 2, I'll look at and define each of these groups; I'll also discuss the common variations within each group.

Similarly, the catchall term "sexual misconduct" covers a very wide range of transgressions, from felonies to exploitation to poor judgment. These include (from most to least harmful) sexual assault; role bait-and-switch; sex as a spiritual teaching or tool; power plays; sex as a prize or honor; verbal manipulation; inauthentic professions of love and/or proposals of marriage; sexual dealmaking; ordinary seduction (or attempted seduction); simple, straightforward offers of sex; and giving in to mutual attraction.

Teachers who transgress in any of the first ten ways are unlikely to maintain long-term monogamy or celibacy, and should not normally be permitted to continue as teachers. However, for some teachers who give in to mutual attraction, and do so only once, there is considerable hope.

Furthermore, there is much that we can do—as individuals, spiritual communities, and a society—to help prevent our spiritual teachers from losing their way. The last nine chapters of this book offer a wide array of these practical preventive measures.

Sexual Transgression by the Numbers

The web brims with sites that report the sexual misdeeds of spiritual teachers. Some focus on a single tradition; others report on the misconduct of spiritual teachers from a variety of traditions (as well as those outside of mainstream traditions).*

* One site, theawarenesscenter.org, for example, blows the whistle on exploitive Jewish spiritual teachers, while guruphiliac.blogspot.com follows a wide range of exploitive spiritual teachers.

No one has recently conducted a survey to determine what percentage of spiritual teachers have had sex with their students. In 1985, however, insight meditation teacher and writer Jack Kornfield published a survey of 54 spiritual teachers from several non-Western traditions. Kornfield asked these 48 men and 6 women* two questions:

1. Are you celibate? and
2. Have you had a sexual relationship with at least one of your students?

The results: 87% of those teachers who were not celibate—34 out of 39—admitted to having had at least one such relationship. If we include the celibate teachers in our sample as well, then 63% of all teachers surveyed had had sex with at least one of their students.

Kornfield's survey is small and decades old, and it neglects teachers in the Abrahamic traditions, as well as well-known mavericks who don't strongly identify with any one tradition. Yet it should nevertheless give us pause. After all, how would you feel if you learned that 63% of doctors had had sex with their patients, or 63% of professors had had sex with their students, or 63% of psychologists had had sex with their clients?†

Since 1985, not a single follow-up survey has been conducted on spiritual teachers' sexual involvement with their students. Arguably, this is itself something of a scandal. However, more recent anecdotal evidence—i.e., an ongoing stream of new scandals—suggests that widespread sexual misconduct continues, though almost certainly at a rate lower than 63%. In any case, it does seem fair

* In 1985, far fewer women were trained (or permitted) to become spiritual teachers—hence the imbalance in Kornfield's sample.

† Multiple studies show that, in fact, roughly 10–20% (depending on the profession) of male professionals in these fields have had sex with their clients, patients, or students, and that 30% of clergy have been sexual with their congregants. These figures are themselves high enough to cause Peter Rutter to declare, in *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, that “sexual exploitation of professional relationships is epidemic in our society.” It may be epidemic in other cultures as well, but to my knowledge no one has sufficiently studied the phenomenon elsewhere.

to say that, among all helping professionals, spiritual teachers have earned the #1 spot for sexual transgression.

In fact, as this book will show, the prevalence of such misdeeds is not the result of *any* of the five standard positions described earlier. Rather, it reflects a welter of interrelated causes—some of them quite surprising:

- ▶ The singular intimacy between spiritual teachers and their students—an intimacy that spans all traditions.
- ▶ The psychology of masculine sexuality—in particular, the ability to be wise, compassionate, loving, aware, and careful in most areas of life, yet foolish, acquisitive, or predatory when it comes to sex.
- ▶ The unique mega-alpha status of spiritual teachers in most spiritual communities.
- ▶ The arrogance that often springs from genuine but limited spiritual insight.
- ▶ The counterintuitive reality that the folks who sexually transgress tend to be well known and well trained.
- ▶ The exceptionally large power differential between spiritual teachers and their students—a differential much larger than the one between ordinary spiritual leaders and their congregants, or college professors and their students.
- ▶ Spiritual communities' failure to sufficiently encourage (and require) conscientious behavior from their teachers—and their unintentional support of misconduct.
- ▶ The unacknowledged sexual power of spiritual teachers' students, and the ways in which they wield it.
- ▶ The many expected and unexpected ways in which celibacy encourages sexual misconduct.

None of these causes takes spiritual teachers off the hook, of course. Nor does any qualify as an acceptable excuse for misconduct. However, the closer we scrutinize these causes, the more deeply we understand them—and the wiser we become about supporting our spiritual teachers' wholesome actions.

Focusing on Sanity and Safety

This is not a book of blame. My primary concerns are for the safety of women and men who walk a spiritual path, and with the health of the spiritual communities to which they belong.

Nor is this a compendium of spiritual teachers' misdeeds.* Other writers have done a good job of revealing and cataloguing many spiritual teachers' past transgressions, so there's no need for me to do it again here.

The purposes of my own book are more constructive. First, it examines the mental and emotional lives of spiritual teachers who have sex with their students, as well as those of teachers who stay lovingly monogamous or honorably celibate. It looks at the complex of forces that tempt otherwise insightful, compassionate, and well-intentioned teachers to lose their way—and that tempt some of their students to lose their own way as well. It investigates a variety of practices that can become breeding grounds for sexual misconduct, including celibacy, guru-disciple relationships, sex as a spiritual teaching, and “crazy wisdom”—i.e., spiritual guidance or insight expressed in a bizarre or seemingly nonsensical form. It analyzes why most of our current efforts to keep spiritual teachers from transgressing usually don't (and, in fact, can't) work. Perhaps most importantly, however, it suggests a set of practices and structures that can build community, encourage healthy student-teacher relationships, increase trust and intimacy between teachers and their students, and help authentic spiritual teachers stay happily monogamous or celibate.

None of this requires miracles or profound mystical experience.

* One such compendium is Geoffrey D. Falk's book *Stripping the Gurus: Sex, Violence, Abuse and Enlightenment*, which is available as both a print volume and a free e-book. Falk's detailed, snarky, meticulously-researched book covers dozens of well-known spiritual teachers from a wide range of traditions, as well as many from outside of those traditions. His book is an eye-opening read and provides many valuable cautionary tales. You can also, of course, access many hundreds of tales of misconduct simply by Googling “spiritual teacher” and “scandal.”

Almost all of it is readily doable with the people and institutions already in place. Furthermore, nearly all of it can be done reasonably quickly and without enormous effort, expense, or gnashing of teeth. This book lays out and knits together the necessary pieces—and, I hope, provides the inspiration for us to get moving in the right direction.

Yet spiritual teachers are not the people who must take the all-important first step. That responsibility falls to us: their students, followers, disciples, and protégés.

That first step is this: *We must be willing to let go of whom we wish, hope, and desire our spiritual teachers to be, and begin to relate to them as they actually are.* This means fully accepting—in our hearts, minds, and guts—some painful but essential truths:

All spiritual teachers—no matter how enlightened (or deluded)—are human beings, with the same physical, mental, and emotional equipment as the rest of us. Indeed, if they weren't, how could we possibly follow in their footsteps and what could they really teach us? When we accept that our teachers are fundamentally just like us, we give ourselves a huge gift: we accept *in ourselves* the potential to embody the same wisdom, compassion, and spirit of service that we value in them.

All spiritual teachers—no matter how enlightened—make some mistakes and misjudgments. From the viewpoint of the Absolute, we can say that there are no accidents, or that the very concept of “mistake” is a mental construct. Fair enough. But on the relative level—the level on which it's true to say “Look both ways before crossing the street or you might get run over”—spiritual teachers can and do err.

Spiritual teachers are susceptible to temptation, sexual and otherwise. Many can resist it far better, and for far longer, than most of us—and many are able to see it coming well in advance. But spiritual teachers are also exposed to far greater—and far more frequent—temptations than most of us.

Many spiritual teachers are sexy. Some are extremely sexy. The same is true of some of their students. This is an essential—

if obvious—part of the mix, yet few discussions of the topic acknowledge it.

It is entirely possible for a spiritual teacher to be wise, compassionate, empathetic, and inspiring, and at the same time sexually exploitive. This may seem entirely contradictory, but spiritual teachers have proven it true time after time. For better or worse, we humans are often contradictory creatures—especially when it comes to sex, power, and vocation.