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I Love the Way You Lie to Me

By JENNIFER RICHARD | Published: ~~APRIL 24, 2013~~

In my comparative politics courses I teach young college students about the phenomena of cults-of-personality. It comes up in my unit on communism, when I get to [Krushchev's Secret Speech of 1956](#). This was a private condemnation of the atrocities masterminded by Stalin,

“who absolutely did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and who practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward that which seemed to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts.”
(excerpt from Khrushchev's speech; a complete transcript can be found [here](#))

This speech gives specific examples of the types of coercive tactics and abuses of power one might find in a society governed by a cult-of-personality. With this information in our thinking caps, the class can then discuss other historic cults-of-personality, like Mao, Khomeini, and Mubarak and the propaganda needed to maintain these brutal, repressive, and oppressive regimes.

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The Smart People



Propaganda for Stalin's regime often showed this type of affection from women and children. Meanwhile, he was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of human beings, women and children included. It's ok though, because Stalin loves women and children, and this was all for their benefit, anyway. Clearly.

Ok, thanks for the history lesson. But, what does this have to do with yoga?

Translating the political notion of the cult-of-personality into the yoga realm is not a far stretch. Take Khrushchev's description of Stalin, make a couple adjustments for yoga, and here is what you get:

The yoga teacher who has formed a cult-of-personality absolutely does not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and practices exclusion and marginalization, not only toward everything which opposes him, but also toward that which seems to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts.

Add a proclivity for abuse of power manifested in sexual exploitation and manipulation, and you have many of our recent yoga scandals in a nutshell.

The personality around which a cult forms is often times quite similar to the [Weberian charismatic leader](#). Charisma is understood to be the power dynamic wherein the leader is seen as more-than-human by his followers. This type of leadership is not particular to any type of organization. It is not set aside for politics, religion, or [athletics](#).

This is not to say that every deified leader has a veritable cult-of-personality. To wit, the cult-of-personality necessarily employs coercive means to maintain the vision of godliness; a charismatic leader [may](#) or [may not](#) do this. **We see this type of deification everywhere, because where human beings are, there the cult may possibly be.**

Because the yoga world is comprised of human beings, it, too, has its fair share of individuals who have the type of delusive personalities that vie for power via coercion. These leaders offer a salvific message of extrication from the human condition (that is, uncertainty), implicitly claiming some absolute certainty. Offering an answer to a problem that has no solution is not only deceptive, but it is also quite alluring. It is as if these teachers pull us close with a playful grin and

whisper seductively, “I have the answer.” Succumbing to this erotic rush, we exhale and declare in exhilaration, “Don’t stop. I love the way you lie to me.”

Simply do a google search for “[yoga scandal](#)” and a candy shop of colorful stories will appear before you. Certain elements reappear in many of these stories, such as sexual exploitation of students in exchange for professional advancement, or the inevitable excommunication that comes on the heels of disagreement with the leader. Some stories are more tragic, such as the bizarre set of circumstances surrounding [the death of Ian Thorson](#) in April of 2012. Regardless of the specifics, all of these leaders use manipulation, shame, exclusion, and many other repugnant tactics to continue the lie. *The basic lie at the heart of all cults-of-personality is that the leader is working for the interest of those under him with absolute knowledge of what is politically best or morally correct.*



Bikram Choudhury smiles as throngs of Bikram yoga asana practitioners lie in Savasana. Choudhury is the most recent charismatic yoga teacher to be engulfed in scandal.

If a cult-of-personality is dependent upon widespread propaganda and deception, then, the problem with yoga is not just the teachers that fall susceptible to the lure of power. **Rather, the problem is that people believe the lie that yoga is somehow *categorically different* than all other systems.** The reason people believe this lie is because the charismatic leaders discourage critical thinking in favor of submission and acceptance, which is reinforced by the benefits that come from being in the good graces and high favor of the leader. Further, because the followers have raised the leaders to such a high position, **thoughtlessness now permeates a community that could be vibrantly creative, a community that could significantly contribute to the world in general.**



STOP THINKING.

While the gentle urging to “stop thinking” is often accompanied by good intentions, for instance when a friend encourages you to stop obsessing about that boy, that girl, that job, and the endless list of unknowns, the thoughtlessness that permeates our culture is staggering and debilitating.

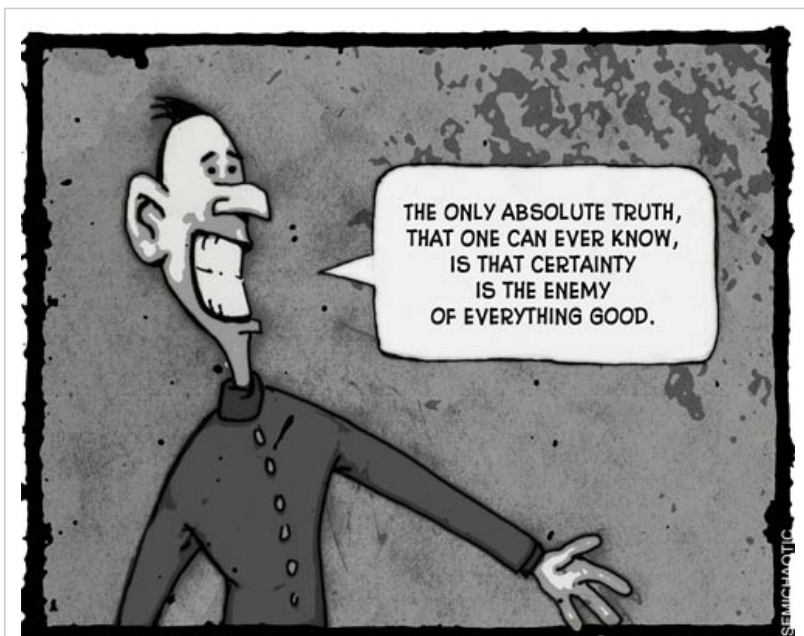
I want to be clear that I am not accusing those that have fallen prey to various cults-of-personality of being altogether thoughtless. The situation is much more complicated, which is only a credit to the manipulation and deception employed by the leader. I have had many conversations with individuals who have been members of yoga communities with deceptive, manipulative leaders. Many of the people indicated that they felt a deep sense of shame and fear for having thoughts that were contrary to the leader’s ideas, or questions about the leader’s integrity. I also found that most of these people looked around and had the impression that they were alone. And, because they respected those around them and feared speaking out against a majority of faithful supporters, they repressed their ideas, concerns, and questions. *This is successful manipulation in action.*

What makes yoga so amazing is that there is no yoga. If we define yoga simply, perhaps we would say yoga is engagement, or union, or even communion. But, what does this mean? All of the traditions, lineages, and schools of thought emerge in the historical landscape upon presenting an answer to this question. In this way, yoga is often about engaging the question of engagement itself. Yoga in the West largely denies this and tells us yoga IS this or yoga IS that and if you aren’t doing it this way, you are wrong.

Really? Because I don’t meditate like you or asana like you, I am wrong?

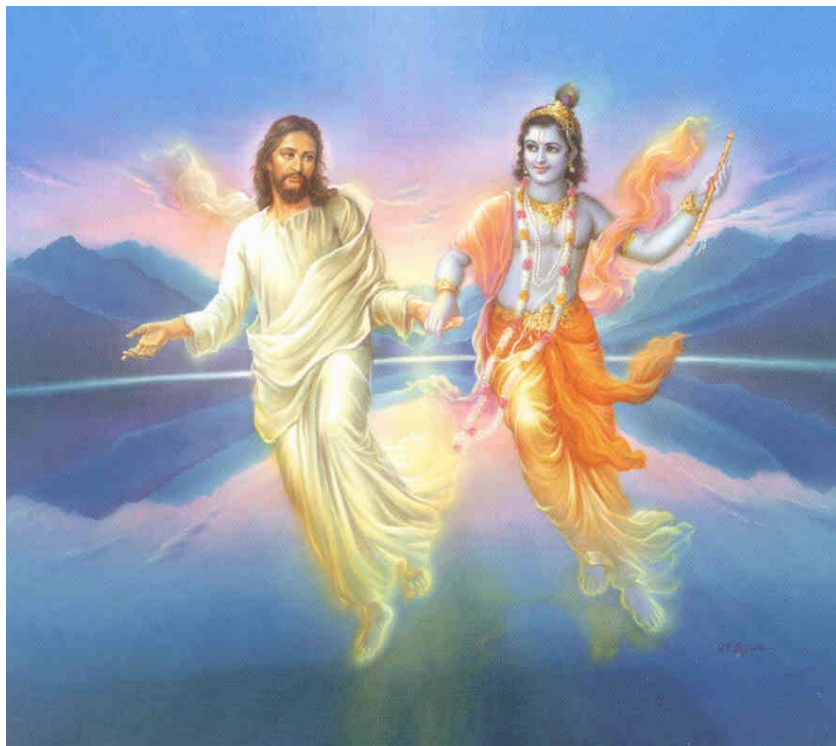
This is a lie. And the primary basis of this fallacy is the belief that there is an answer at all.

What too often happens under the tutelage of a deified yoga teacher is the deconstruction of individual imagination, creativity, thought, and inquiry. I have had teachers and fellow yoga practitioners tell me that I need to stop thinking so much. Regardless of the intention behind these prods, I categorically reject the sentiment. **Any teacher, any person, that does not encourage your thought, your disagreement, your unique perspective is riding high on the waves of their own greatness and is dangerously close to the line of absolutism that marks all cults-of-personality** (that is, if they haven’t already crossed this line).



In our efforts to appease our anxieties, the declaration of something absolutely certain is comforting, enticing, and altogether relieving. The problem is that there are many different people offering their versions of "Truth." In a world of uncertainty, we seek certainty, often to the detriment of our well-being.

Cults-of-personality, that play on the human quest for certainty in an uncertain world, work through deception and manipulation to encourage ecstatic submission to their authority. Combine this with the the basic Western framework of understanding and we are in for a ride. **Yoga in the West, in many instances, is not offering anything "new" to us. It takes the same Judeo-Christian framework and replaces the jargon with cool new-age words. So that the Holy Spirit is now your True Self; God is Brahman or the Universe; Jesus is (enter favorite Hindu deity here).**



This is not meant to criticize the Judeo-Christian faiths, but to point out that placing this tradition in the Western framework, while comfortable and familiar, greatly inhibits the power of the tradition and robs it of its living meaning. **After being pulverized through the blender of Western philosophical categories, this magnificent story is left dead and lifeless.** This need not be the case. We could, as teachers, be honest with ourselves and our students about what we know and what we are doing. We are, indeed, limited by our experiences and our frameworks. However, we are not limited in our ability to expand these things and to allow the space for competing frameworks and a healthy tension of ideas. Subjecting ourselves to manipulative charismatic leaders, however, will never allow for this type of growth and evolution.

Until yoga can be honest about its message, we will never get out of this trap. **There is no catch-all solution for how to go through this life; so be wary of anyone who claims to know what it is.** Often, they are just telling you there is a scary monster under your bed. As long as we believe this, the cults-of-personality will continue to grow and the yoga world will continue to be robbed of the potential greatness of this vast tradition. Get on your knees and look under the bed yourself. You may just find that the scary monster simply wants to play.

Bio

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Jennifer Richard is a professor-in-training, and is very excited to be finishing her PhD in 2013! She has been an instructor at the university-level for 4 years, teaching in the political science departments at both Tulane University in New Orleans, LA and at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA. She has Master's degrees in religious studies and political science, and currently teaches courses in political theory and comparative politics.

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