The Master

By William Eaton

2002, and slightly tweaked in 2016

For decades I have been fascinated by a particular Zen story. A young man climbs the steepest of steep mountains to reach the home of the wisest master of all. "Master," he says, "please teach me how I can attain satori."

With his cane the master beats the young man, sending him, staggering and bruised, back down the mountain.

After much meditation, after receiving the teachings of many lesser masters, the young man decides that he must again climb the mountain—only the great master can teach him how to attain satori.

Again he climbs, again he asks the great master, "Please teach me how I can attain satori."

Again the master beats him with his cane, sending him back down the mountain.

For years the man, no longer so young, wanders hopeless, and then finally . . . He achieves satori, let's say. A third time he climbs the mountain, this time asking no favors, simply taking the old man's cane and sending him, staggering and bruised, on his way.

Among the many things I like about this story is how, like many a great story, it encourages many conflicting interpretations. (Or, as the author of an extremely successful scholarly work once put it, "Part of the reason for its success is, I regretfully conclude, that it can be too nearly all things to all people.")

At one extreme, I suppose one might prattle on about the master, the student and paradigm shifts, how insight begins when one is forced to discard the conventional wisdom. At another extreme, I have a friend—a teacher with a masochistic streak—who claims the story is bogus. That teachers and students beat on one another, he can certainly imagine, but he is equally sure that such behavior has nothing to do with wisdom, Zen or not. Similarly, with a good dose of American earnestness, we might see this as yet another story of the tremendous harm that lousy teachers can do and of the sad consequences of physical abuse. Instead of being encouraging and imparting some of what he knows to the eager young man,

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the master, anxious above all to maintain his authority, resorts to violence. And so what could the young man possibly learn except the law of the jungle?

I have never viewed the story in these particular ways. When I was in my twenties and thirties I saw it as a story about a young man, a seeker of knowledge, an idealist confronting a vain and meaningless world. I loved the idea of a student who refuses to be humbled and who has the good sense and courage to believe in himself. And I loved the paradox of how—thanks to a brutal, wise, beneficent master—this young man is led to see the emptiness of status and the brutality of authority. Knowledge is disillusionment, and Truth—a wise man fending off rivals with a crutch.

Now in my forties, I might add that, made to see that life requires choosing between beating or being beaten, the young man makes the right choice. The generous master helps him learn the rarely admitted first truth of epistemology: power is knowledge. Wisdom is at best tangentially related to learning, intellect or spirituality; we come to call wise and accept as truth the beliefs of those—be they individuals, groups, nations or corporations—who hold the largest sticks and aren't squeamish about hurting others with them.

At the same time—a sixth possible interpretation, and we've hardly scratched the surface—the young man's progress shows how essential confidence is to knowledge; it may only be insecurity and the comforts of ignorance that keep us from omnipotence. Emerson, a young man in a young country, taught that "there is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; . . . The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do nor does he know until he has tried." All it takes to wield the wise man's cane is to believe you are entitled to wield it. Yet this simple test eliminates all but a few.

So far we have been imagining, as I long did, that the young man is the hero of the story. Now middle-aged, I find I care little for him; it is the older man who interests me. What is he thinking and feeling as he deals with the young man? Why does he act as he does?

It has occurred to me that long ago, during his student years, the master himself must have stormed a mountain or two, taken several beatings, had adventures in and around his valley home. In one way or another he must have come to realize that, since he was young and strong, the prevailing old master's title was his for the taking. And what better refuge from the aggression and cruelty of human society than a solitary house on top of a mountain?

So then for many decades the master has lived there alone, exalted by the people below as infinitely wise. It amuses him to reflect on his headstrong, gullible youth—how eager he was to knock off the previous master, gain his place and privileges, his mastery. From bits of news and gossip that have risen up the mountain, he has heard that down below have passed several men and women of stunning insight, no doubt smarter than he.

Most of them have worked as laborers, housewives and scribes, their genius doubted even by their spouses. Apparently one of the more vociferous was stoned to death, another exiled, two others forced to earn their livings with the circus.

The master appreciates his good fortune, and even as he laughs self-mockingly he takes some pride in what he has been able to learn up on his mountain top. The power of power; the wisdom of keeping one's distance; the loneliness of intelligence and the ignorance to which isolation leads; the various pains that come to rescue an unfettered, undistracted mind from itself. Was it the first day? the first week? that he had understood: a master on a mountain top is a relic. His role is to provide people down below a means of giving themselves over to admiration and love—which rather quickly turns into self-admiration and self-love. In the process all get to ignore the compromises and uncertainties of trying to share respect and affection with flesh-and-blood human beings.

So now here comes the latest iteration of his younger self—full of youthful idealism; sufficiently clever, ambitious and strong to climb rapidly; in too much of a hurry to stop and wonder what might await him on top. The young man says he wants to attain satori. And even if, unlike the several others who had made it to the mountain top in years past, this particular youth does indeed value wisdom above all else—should he be embraced for that? What is this wisdom business but a more rarefied, narcissistic diversion: expanding one's mind like the muscles on one's chest?

"*L'homme est si malheureux qu'il s'ennuierait même sans aucune cause d'ennui par l'état propre de sa complexion*," Pascal wrote.

> Human nature is enough to make a man miserable. And we are so shallow we can be distracted from any number of worries by a cue stick and billiard ball. People are wrestling in offices with mathematics problems just so they can say they solved a previously unsolved problem. Others risk their lives on the grounds that if they survive they will be famous! And, finally, there are those who are beating their brains out describing and analyzing human behavior such as this. Not because this is a way to wisdom, but simply to show the world that they are wise.

The question may be asked: why, the first two times, doesn't the master, instead of whacking the young man, offer him a cup of tea and talk to him of these things? One possibility, offered by a poet and philosopher of my acquaintance, is that the master understands that knowledge begins in the body. We disguise in our concepts and beliefs what are really physiological needs, Nietzsche noted, and thus philosophy might be described as a "misunderstanding of the body". We might imagine the wise man successfully using his cane to lead the student to come to terms with this confusion.

I have thought that perhaps the master doesn't want to confuse the student by being hospitable when the young man is clearly so anxious to shove him aside. Or perhaps the

master is focused on how human beings—the most ambitious in particular—rarely listen. And, even if this one happened to, what would be the advantage of words over blows? Little besides random facts and opinions can be quickly learned; reaching a new level of understanding requires years of, like as not painful, experience and reflection.

The beater—the master might note as he beats the young man—quickly learns that remorse is an excellent way to hide from oneself. He might scan the mountain tops for other students. The beaten might knead his wounds and smell the blood on his fingers—so reveling in the seeming strength of his feelings and the drama of his life as to forget for a blissful moment that there is anyone else on Earth besides him.

Why, when the young man makes his third appearance, doesn't the master simply show his heir around the grounds, negotiate some sort of golden parachute? He must be wise enough to recognize that his time is up.

Perhaps he respects the ritual—the young man symbolically taking the cane, manifesting his boldness and strength; the old man unable to break his own fall. Perhaps, though he long ago tired of comforting others with riddles and paradoxes, the meaninglessness of the ten thousand things—still, this is the life he knows. The security and serenity of his mountain top, the little perks of master-dom: there is a lot he will miss.

His glasses broken by the young man's blows, an arm bruised and twisted, my master is on all fours on the side of the mountain, trying to make as much downward progress as he can before it gets dark and cold. "If only I'd known what I know now," with a laugh he tells himself. "I would have fought for a desk job in the valley."

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