

«GURU AND THE SLIPPERS»



In many Indian spiritual traditions, touching or worshipping the Guru's "lotus feet" is a traditional gesture of reverence and surrender. The symbolism appears repeatedly throughout these stories.

"Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey... One makes you strong; the other weakens you."

— Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*

«All in white, as proud as Pegasus,
You walk with dignity and poise.
But the shadow trailing after you
Still sports two tiny devil's horns».
(A little poem)

City X, India

Sunday

So...

I have finally moved to City X to live near the Guru.

I settled all my affairs and gave up the apartment I had been renting in Pune.

That's it.

Even New Year's and Christmas I celebrated here, in City X.

My God...

What a year it has been!

I'm still alive.

Ha-ha!
Last year was the Year of the Rooster.
Perhaps that explains everything.
That rooster pecked away at me until there was almost nothing left.
Dear God...
What a year that "little rooster year" turned out to be.
But...
I met the Guru.
That was the whole reason I had come to India:
to find a Master.
Could it really be...
that I had?

The Guru was away from City X.

He had developed a cough, and the woman doctor had taken him to a place where the air was cleaner.
The air here is always thick with dust and smog, and all of us suffer from it.
A couple of days before he left, I went to see him at his house.
As usual, the room was full of people.
They had come to say goodbye before his departure.
Everyone, as always, sat on the floor on flat cushions spread across the room.
There was no place left for me, so they seated me right beside his feet, close enough that I could lean against the wall.
He spoke to me.
He asked something about my passport and my visa.
Yet I had the distinct feeling that this was a kind of ritual.
He had already asked me about my passport and my visa dozens of times.
Perhaps he simply wanted to hear my voice.
He paid no attention to my answers—that I had managed to extend my passport for another year and my visa for another five months.
He sat motionless, looking either at the newspaper or at the table.
Listening to my voice.
My voice sounded surprisingly deep.
Even I hadn't expected that.
I felt all my energy turn into hot steam that rose upward and, it seemed to me, stretched my whole being into a single thread.
I closed my eyes.
I could feel that wave of heat pass through my throat and surge into my head.
There was a pleasant tingling deep at the base of my brain.
My head grew intoxicated.
Strange.
I had always imagined that experiences like this were supposed to bring clarity, not intoxication.
It felt as though light were radiating from me.

People kept coming up to the Guru, bowing to him.
Some kissed his feet.
Meanwhile, I remained where I was, my eyes closed, quietly melting.
And it seemed to me that I was sitting beside my destiny.
Beside the Master who would fill the emptiness left by my beloved Osho.
It seemed to me that I had finally found what I had been searching for.
When I opened my eyes just a little, I noticed him glance at me several times.
It happened while a Japanese woman, almost trembling with happiness,
came and sat down on the floor in front of him.
She looked at me, and our eyes met.
For one brief moment I felt her whole being.
She seemed closer to me than family.
I loved her.
And then the Guru looked at me again.
Long and attentively.
His face expressed nothing.
The next person to arrive was an American sculptor—his name, I think, was
Rosenbaum—the one who had made a portrait bust of our Guru.
He brought the sculpture in and placed it on the table.
The Guru pointed at me.
"Let her tell us what she thinks.
She is a very good artist.
She knows.
Tell us what you think of this portrait."
He nodded in my direction.
The words "*She is a very good artist*" stirred something unpleasant inside me.
Only the faintest shadow...
Something that did not belong in the atmosphere of unconditional love.
But I blamed that shadow on myself.
"*The Guru is beyond error. He is showing us our weak spots. He is exposing
our ego,*" I repeated inwardly, like a mantra.
It was the mantra every one of us lived by.

The portrait—the Guru's head—had been sculpted in clay.
Later it would be cast in bronze.
It was about the size of a medium watermelon.
Although the American sculptor had studied somewhere and was obviously
confident in his abilities, the work itself was amateurish.
At my art academy he would never have passed an exam with a sculpture like
that.
The likeness was there, more or less.
But the whole head looked as though it had been made of cotton wool.
The forms were soft, chewed-up, lacking any real structure.
There was no sense of the skull beneath the surface, no clarity and, to be
honest, it wasn't all that convincing as a portrait either.
My first husband, Sasha, was a professional sculptor.

A remarkably gifted one.

So...

I do know something about sculpture.

But when I looked at the Guru, I could see that he was pleased with the portrait.

And flattered by the very fact that someone had chosen to sculpt his head.

The sculptor and his girlfriend were sitting at the Guru's feet.

To me, their love for their teacher seemed utterly genuine.

"What does it matter whether the work is professional or not?" I thought.

"The important thing is that it was made with love."

This isn't an international exhibition.

It's a satsang."

So I said aloud that I liked the sculpture.

Apparently, they were expecting me to say more.

A silence settled over the room.

Not knowing what else to add, I began improvising.

I muttered something about how *"the artist had managed to capture the character of his subject..."*

I felt awful.

In a single instant, that little episode swallowed up all my radiance.

The Guru interrupted me in mid-sentence and began talking about something else.

I interpreted it as:

"Shut off the fountain."

I felt relieved that I was no longer expected to comment on something that was difficult to speak about with admiration and impolite to speak about without it.

Something vile had settled inside me.

It wouldn't go away.

Unexpectedly, the Guru said to the sculptor, pointing at me,

"She painted that portrait of me.

She did.

I sent it to a friend of mine in India."

The sculptor turned to me and began saying kind things about my drawing.

I praised his sculpture once again.

We went on exchanging compliments, although everything that could be said had already been said.

Then it suddenly struck me how absurd it all was.

Here we were, in a place where people came to meditate, sitting around praising one another.

I wanted to close my eyes again and simply sit in silence.

To bring the conversation to an end, I said jokingly,

"We're great!"

I said it without the slightest ulterior motive, expecting him to laugh—or at least smile.

I don't know what he thought he had heard, but instead he looked straight into my eyes.

Very seriously.

Very intently.

Almost fearfully.

Inside, I cried out,

"My God, I was joking! You can't take yourself that seriously!"

But by then I had become so accustomed to being misunderstood that I accepted it as just another misunderstanding.

Then the Guru left the room.

A little while later he came back.

Someone brought him a small metal spittoon.

He began chewing something and watching television.

Everyone else sat silently on the floor.

I studied his profile.

Something about his face had changed.

Then I realized.

He had apparently taken out his dentures.

Now, with his toothless mouth, he was chewing something red—the kind of thing all Indians chew—and every now and then he spat a thin red stream, like blood, into the little metal spittoon.

I suppressed a slight wave of nausea.

At the same time I felt a faint stab of guilt that, unlike the other disciples, I was not touched by such intimate details of *"a holy man's everyday life."*

"And yet he is a Master," I told myself.

The whole experience was powerful.

It was even a kind of test.

An examination.

He no longer looked like the formidable Guru.

He looked like a frail old man in a woolen cap.

"I must always remember that he is a Master," I kept telling myself.

Seeing him like that made a deep impression on me.

Something inside me shifted once again.

I couldn't have said where.

Or in what direction.

When we all came up to say goodbye, he pointed at my loose hair, part of which was braided into thin little plaits, and asked whether I could braid Uma's hair the same way.

As he spoke, he looked straight into my eyes.

It seemed that today he was trying to discover something in me that I did not want to share with other people:

my reputation as an artist...

my little braids...

In other words, he was trying to uncover my *"hidden ego."*

My *"weak spot."*

"Oh, Master," I thought,
"I'm afraid my ego is hiding somewhere else."
I told him I would braid Uma's hair.
Then I asked,
"Do you like my braids?"
"Yes," he replied.
I told him I was sorry he was bald, otherwise I would have braided his hair too.
It seemed he didn't like the joke.
As I was leaving, I bowed to him with *namaste*.
He turned and lifted his face toward me.
His face was suddenly very close to mine.
It seemed to me that he wanted me to kiss him on the cheek, as others did.
But I didn't.
I didn't want to.
I said goodbye and walked out of the room.
Feeling strangely...
Unlike myself.
At the front door another surprise was waiting for me.
Someone had put on my brand-new, comfortable shoes—the pair I had bought only two days earlier—and had left behind a pair of worn slippers, slightly too small for me.
I couldn't believe it!
In the house of an enlightened Guru—a place where no outsiders ever came, where nothing like this had ever happened before!
(At least, that's what the people who looked after the Guru assured me.)
And, to make matters worse, I didn't have the money to buy another pair of shoes.
I was upset.
They advised me to come back the next day.
"Perhaps the person who put on your shoes by mistake will realize it and bring them back."
Brilliant!
How completely swept away by meditation would one have to be to make a mistake like that?
Considering that my shoes were black, while the worn slippers left behind were made of yellowish-cream fabric with red and blue patterns, it was hard to believe that anyone could have mixed them up in a hurry.
I was irritated.
Could this be some kind of omen?
A sign?
Could Existence be trying to tell me something this way?

The next day, Sunday, I laid out my Tarot cards.
I had a headache, and I had the feeling that something bad had happened to me.

But I couldn't figure out what it was.

I simply couldn't see it.

That's why I turned to the Tarot.

I'm not very good at fortune-telling.

Among us there was one woman who was very good at reading the Tarot.

On Sundays there were no satsangs.

Instead, the flat rooftop of the Satsang House turned into a little marketplace.

It was Sunday.

I thought I might find her there—she earned a little money reading Tarot cards.

But she wasn't there.

So, without much hope, I decided to stop by the Guru's house and ask whether there was any news of my missing shoes.

I had no desire to go there.

As far as I was concerned, I had already said goodbye to him the day before.

(He was leaving in a couple of days.)

The only thing that interested me now was my missing shoes.

Something strange was happening inside me.

A strange sense of emptiness.

Almost like an illness.

A fog in my head.

Complete disorientation.

And I knew it had nothing to do with the shoes.

I simply couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I just felt wretched, the way you do at the very beginning of an illness.

At the Guru's house, many pairs of shoes stood by the entrance.

Mine, of course, were nowhere to be seen.

Something—or someone—prompted me to look into the room.

This time it really was crowded.

His personal doctor, a tall German woman, came over to me at once and invited me to sit down in the passageway.

I had absolutely no desire to stay.

Inside, everything in me was trying to run away from this place.

But around the Guru there was always an atmosphere of reverence.

To refuse such an invitation would have seemed almost like a challenge.

Being invited was considered an honour.

At that moment I had neither the strength, the fire, nor the fighting spirit to challenge anyone.

It felt as though everything inside me had burned out.

Powerlessness.

Emptiness.

As if I'd been drained dry.

I was looking for the Tarot reader.

And for my missing shoes.

I needed someone to explain what was happening to me.

Something had happened to me!

I didn't want to stay there.

Some force was simply driving me out of that house.

For a while I sat motionless, watching, not knowing what to make of what was happening inside me.

I myself was astonished by that inner force that kept driving me—
pushing me—
out.

But it was already too late.

They had found a place for me.

They had seated me.

I seemed to go limp.

I felt ill.

I gave in.

We waited a long time for the Guru.

Someone put on a cassette of Indian music.

Never in my life had I felt so strange.

I was completely out of tune here.

An outsider.

A stranger.

And this was only a day after my brief "*illumination*."

Here I was, sitting irritated, oppressed, almost ill...

There was no love in me.

A new me.

Then the Guru appeared.

Everyone stood up.

I had been given a place in the passageway.

He looked straight into my eyes.

Long.

Intently.

Then he sat down in his chair.

We were told that we would receive *prasad* from the Guru—Indian sweets—
and that the meeting would end afterwards.

Once everyone had received the *prasad*, people began going up to the Guru
to say goodbye.

I went up as well.

I couldn't wait to leave.

The Guru looked at me and said,

"Stay. I want to talk to you."

So I had no choice but to stay.

Perhaps this conversation would finally explain what was happening to me.

At that moment I had neither the strength nor the confidence to trust what my
intuition was whispering to me.

I was beginning to shiver.

The other disciples looked at me with envy.

"Lucky you!"

I smiled.

But inside, there was a strange contradiction.

My mind kept saying,

"It's wonderful that an enlightened Master is giving me so much attention."

And yet, at the very same moment, all I wanted was to leave.

Immediately.

To run.

The years I had spent in India with different "*enlightened*" gurus had taught me not to listen to my inner voice.

Not to trust it.

Not to follow where it led.

That was the most destructive thing that surrendering my "**I**" at the lotus feet of an enlightened Guru had done to me.

There were only a few of us left in the room.

Only those who had been invited to lunch.

"The chosen ones."

I didn't even feel like eating.

The dishes were brought in.

Everyone was given a plate of food.

Nothing had ever tasted so unappetizing.

The Guru was eating with his hand, the Indian way—the very way my squeamish nature has never been able to watch.

The sight of it has always taken away my appetite.

I began to eat and discovered a hair on my plate.

I thought,

This is a sign.

I felt revolted.

Lunch in the Guru's house was *prasad*—a blessing.

According to tradition, *prasad* must neither be left unfinished nor thrown away.

Some of those present even licked their plates perfectly clean with their tongues—

"absorbing the blessing down to the very last drop," so to speak.

Fortunately, the plate was wide, so I began pretending to eat from the other side.

Overcoming my disgust and not knowing what to do, I pretended to chew.

In this "sacred" silence, was I supposed to announce that there was a hair in the "blessed food"?

What a stupid situation!

I remembered how my stepfather, once finding a hair on his plate, pushed the dish aside and calmly said to our housekeeper, "Thank you, but next time, please serve the hair on a separate plate!"

The room was filled with reverent silence.
Everyone was **"receiving communion"** with the **"divine Guru"** through food,
while I was struggling not to throw up.
I didn't have the courage to blurt out,
"There's a hair on my plate!"
My head still ached.
Everything was wrapped in fog.
Around me, people quietly clinked their spoons, completely absorbed in their meal.
I cautiously put a tiny morsel from the opposite edge of the plate—well away from the hair—into my mouth.
At that very moment the Guru looked at me.
Fixed his eyes on me.
And together with that little bite,
I swallowed his gaze—
as seasoning.

Everything inside me burst into flames.
My throat.
My stomach.
My whole body.
It was as though I had swallowed pure alcohol.
Or a tablespoon of chili.
There hadn't been any hot spices on my plate.
There was no burning taste in my mouth.
Only inside—
in my chest,
in my stomach—
everything was on fire.
I closed my eyes.
I felt intoxicated.
Then they brought more rice and some kind of curry.
I refused it and handed back what was left on my plate—
the hair included.
My head was spinning.
It was difficult to open my eyes.
Nor did I want to.
Inside, everything was burning.

Eventually we all went our separate ways.
The Guru's words that he *"wanted to talk to me"* had apparently been nothing more than a pretext to keep me there.
Why?
The thought of black sorcerers flashed through my mind.

I hurried back to the Satsang House once again.
But the Tarot reader was nowhere to be found.
The people around me were surprisingly unfriendly.
Then again, I had no desire to see anyone except the Tarot reader.
I wanted to hide.

As I was passing a mirror, I caught a glimpse of myself.
For a moment it seemed to me that my face looked terrifying.
I went home.

Back home I kept asking myself:

What had that been?

If it hadn't been for my shoes, I would never have gone to the Guru's house that day.

I would have stayed home.

I would have read the Tarot for myself.

Or found someone to read the cards for me—

someone who might at least shed a little light on what was happening to me.

What was driving me away from the house of a man whom everyone regarded as an enlightened Guru—

a man everyone longed to see?

What was this force trying to pull me away from a "*holy man*" who, supposedly, was my helper...

my saviour...

Who himself claimed that he was here to **show us the way to the Light?**

Why did I feel so awful in his presence—

and in the presence of everything that surrounded him?

How was I supposed to understand all this?

As an act of healing?

Or as an act of black magic?

The fact that everyone around me revered him, bowed before him, and even believed they had become enlightened in his presence only made everything more confusing.

Was there something wrong with me?

Or with everyone else?

Whom was I supposed to believe—

my own wild experience,

or the certainty of the majority?

As far as I could see, nothing like this was happening to anyone else.

If I looked only at the facts—

the exchanged shoes...

the hair on my plate...

the way I felt...

that strange sense of being emptied out...

And then there was the Guru's gaze—

swallowed together with the food—

leaving everything inside me burning and my head wrapped in fog.

That, too, could lead one to some rather dark thoughts.

So... what had it been?

Considering my financial problems, my passport, and my visa—
(which, incidentally, was fake)—

I had no choice but to stay.

For the time being...

At the «lotus feet».