



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.

«GURU AND THE SLIPPERS »

City X, India

Sunday

So...

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

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

That was it.

I even spent New Year's and Christmas here, in City X.

My God...

What a year it had been.

And somehow...

I was still alive.

Ha-ha!

The previous year had been the Year of the Rooster.

Perhaps that explained everything.

That little rooster had pecked away at me until there was almost nothing left.

Dear God...

What a year that "little rooster year" had turned out to be.

But...

I had 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 had temporarily left City X.

He had developed a cough, and his doctor—a woman—had taken him somewhere with cleaner air.

The air here was always thick with dust and smog.

We all suffered from it.

A few days before he left, I went to see him at his house.

As usual, the room was full.

People had come to say goodbye before his departure.

Everyone, as always, sat on flat cushions spread across the floor.

There was no room left for me, so they seated me right beside his feet, close enough for me to lean against the wall.

He spoke to me.

He asked about my passport.

About my visa.

Yet I had the distinct feeling that this was some kind of ritual.

He had already asked me those same questions 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.

My voice sounded surprisingly deep.

Even I hadn't expected that.

I felt all my energy turning into hot steam that rose upward, stretching my whole being into a single thread.

I closed my eyes.

I could feel that wave of heat passing through my throat and rising into my head.

There was a pleasant tingling deep at the base of my brain.

My head became intoxicated.

Strange.

I had always imagined that experiences like this would bring clarity.

Not intoxication.

It felt as though light were radiating from me.

People kept approaching the Guru.

Some bowed.

Some kissed his feet.

Meanwhile, I remained where I was, my eyes closed, quietly melting.

It seemed to me that I was sitting beside my destiny.

Beside the Master who would fill the emptiness Osho had left behind.

It seemed that I had finally found what I had come to India in search of.

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 on the floor before him.

She looked at me.

Our eyes met.

For one brief moment I felt her whole being.

She seemed closer to me than family.

I loved her.

Then the Guru looked at me again.

Long.

Attentively.

His expression gave nothing away.

The next person to arrive was an American sculptor.

I think his name was Rosenbaum.

He was the one who had made a portrait bust of our Guru.

He carried the sculpture into the room 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 an 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 it inwardly like a mantra.

It was the mantra we all lived by.

Part II – The First Cracks

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 examination 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.

Without 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, had been a professional sculptor.

An exceptionally 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.

Flattered, perhaps, by the simple 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 completely genuine.

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

"What matters 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 expected 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 "captured the character of his subject."

I felt awful.

In a single instant, that brief exchange swallowed up all my radiance.

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

I understood the message immediately.

"Turn 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 pointed at me and said to the sculptor,

"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 praising my drawing.

I praised his sculpture once again.

We exchanged compliments that neither of us really needed.

Everything that could be said had already been said.

Then, quite suddenly, the absurdity of it all struck me.

Here we were...

In a place where people had come to meditate...

Sitting around praising one another.

I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes again and disappear into silence.

Trying to end the conversation lightly, I laughed and said,

"We're great!"

I meant it as a joke.

Nothing more.

I expected him to laugh.

Or at least smile.

Instead, he looked straight into my eyes.

Very seriously.

Very intently.

Almost...

fearfully.

Inside, I cried,

My God, I was joking!

You can't take yourself that seriously!

But by then I had grown so accustomed to being misunderstood that I accepted it as just one more misunderstanding.

A little while later, the Guru left the room.

When he returned, someone placed a small metal spittoon beside his chair.

He began chewing something while watching television.

Everyone else sat quietly on the floor.

I studied his profile.

Something about his face had changed.

Then I realized.

He had removed 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.

For a brief moment, a wave of nausea rose inside me.

Immediately afterwards came guilt.

Unlike the other disciples, I wasn't moved by these intimate details of a holy man's daily life.

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

The whole experience felt strangely powerful.

Almost like an examination.

A test.

He no longer looked like the formidable Guru.

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

"Don't forget," I kept telling myself.

"He is a Master."

Seeing him like this left a deep impression on me.

Something inside me shifted again.

I couldn't have said where.

Or in which direction.

When we all came forward to say goodbye, he pointed at my loose hair, part of which I had braided into thin little plaits.

He asked whether I could braid Uma's hair the same way.

As he spoke, he looked directly into my eyes.

It seemed that today he was searching for 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.

A place where, everyone assured me, nothing like this had ever happened before.

And, as luck would have it, I had no money to buy another pair.

I was upset.

They advised me to return the following day.

"Perhaps the person who took 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?

Was Existence trying to tell me something?

Part III – Something Had Happened to Me

The following morning—Sunday—I laid out my Tarot cards.

I had a headache.

More than that, I had the unmistakable feeling that something bad had happened to me.

Yet I couldn't understand what it was.

I simply couldn't see it.

That was why I turned to the Tarot.

I'm not particularly good at reading cards.

Among us there was one woman who truly had the gift.

On Sundays there were no satsangs.

Instead, the flat rooftop of the Satsang House turned into a little marketplace where people sold handmade things, drank tea, talked—and where she usually earned a little money reading Tarot.

I thought I might find her there.

She wasn't.

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 the previous day.

He was leaving in another day or two.

The only thing that mattered to me now was finding my shoes.

Yet something strange was happening inside me.

A deep emptiness.

Almost like the beginning of an illness.

My head felt wrapped in fog.

Complete disorientation.

I knew perfectly well that none of it had anything to do with the shoes.

I simply had no explanation for what was happening to me.

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

At the entrance to the Guru's house stood dozens of pairs of shoes.

Mine, of course, were nowhere to be seen.

Something—

or someone—

made me glance into the room.

This time it was overflowing with people.

Before I had a chance to leave, the Guru's personal doctor—a tall German woman—noticed me.

She came over immediately.

"Come," she said.

"Sit down."

She found a place for me in the narrow passageway.

I had absolutely no desire to stay.

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

Something powerful—

something I couldn't understand—

was driving me out of that house.

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

Refusing such an invitation would have seemed like a challenge.

Being invited was considered a privilege.

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 wasn't looking for the Guru.

I was looking for the Tarot reader.

I wanted someone—
anyone—
to explain what was happening to me.
Something **had** happened to me.
There was no doubt about that anymore.
I simply didn't know what.
For a while I sat motionless.
Watching.
Listening.
Some force was simply driving me out of that house.

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.

He looked directly into my eyes.

Long.

Silently.

Intently.

Then he sat down.

We were told that we would receive *prasad*—blessed food—and that afterwards everyone could come forward to say goodbye.

When the sweets had been distributed, people approached him one by one.

I joined the line.

I couldn't wait to leave.

When my turn came, he looked at me and said quietly,

"Stay.

I want to talk to you."

So I had no choice but to stay.

Perhaps now...

perhaps at last...

he would 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.

Part IV – The Chosen Ones

Only a handful of us remained in the room.

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.

I had never tasted such an absence of taste before.

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

It had always taken away my appetite.

I lowered my eyes to my own plate.

And froze.

There was a hair lying on the food.

My first thought was simple.

This is a sign.

A wave of revulsion rose inside me.

Lunch at the Guru's house was *prasad*—

a blessing.

According to tradition, *prasad* should never be wasted.

It should never be 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.

The plate was large, and I pretended to eat from the opposite side, as far away from the hair as possible.

Trying to overcome my disgust, not knowing what to do, I pretended to chew.

In that *"sacred"* silence...

To announce that there was a hair in the *"blessed"* food?

What an absurd situation!

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.

His eyes fixed on mine.

Long.

Unmoving.

And together with that tiny bite...

I swallowed his gaze.

As seasoning.

Instantly...

everything inside me burst into flames.

My throat.

My chest.

My stomach.

My whole body.

It felt as though I had swallowed pure alcohol.

Or a spoonful of burning chili.

There had been no hot spices on my plate.

There was no burning taste in my mouth.

Only inside.

Everything...

was burning.

I closed my eyes.

It was intoxication.

My head was spinning.

It was difficult to open my eyes.

Nor did I want to.

Inside, everything was burning.

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.

Opening my eyes required effort.

I no longer wanted to.

Inside, the burning continued.

Eventually everyone left.

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.

The Tarot reader was still nowhere to be found.

The people around me seemed strangely 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.

Part V – At the Lotus Feet

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 it that had been driving me away from the house of a man whom everyone regarded as an enlightened Master.

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».