

Think of the Peaceful Cat -- Reflections on Initiation

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The world's best fame no higher doth advance
Than breath of wind, whose fickle gusts deceive,
And changing side, leaves name to change and chance.

--*Divine Comedy*, Purgatory, Canto 11, 100-102, Dante Alighieri, tr. E.H. Plumptre (1886)

After a very long initiation, I've come to the conclusion that initiation per-se is overrated. The problem with any initiatic journey is initiation itself:

Why, after all, is it necessary?

Why are we never content in our own skin?

I find the humble domestic cat to be a very wise creature. Once his needs are taken care of, he's just happy with himself and the routine that he establishes. He's content with being, thoroughly satisfied ontologically. Nothing would be more repugnant to such a cat than going through the sort of torture, for lack of a better word, described in so many accounts of spiritual training.

Think of the peaceful cat... would it ever be found in a situation such as what happened in James Ray's sweat-lodge in Arizona, in which some participants died after paying a hefty 10K fee? Here we have a group of participants, petitioners, willing to lose themselves after pouring their savings in the hands of a self-styled guru, and then losing their life.

With people possessed of a certain self-awareness, initiation is happening constantly.

I know a story, which I was told by a Pakistani, who in turn had heard it from a Sufi dervish. It is not only mind-bending, but also refreshingly anti-initiatic. For Sufis, this is quite a departure.

Allow me to transcribe the story, and you will see what I mean:

"Once upon a time there were five prosperous kingdoms in Persia. One day, one of the five kings suddenly died. He didn't have a son, nor had he chosen a successor. His government was at a loss: who would be the new king?

Eventually, the ministers found a solution, and announced the day of the coronation of the new king. Also, they sent out word that on such a day there would be a great celebration, with music, dancing, food, wine, and so on. All people living outside the kingdom were invited to the banquet. They'd be treated princely.

Hundreds, thousands of men set out to reach the court in time for the celebration. But many were sidetracked. Others were taken ill. Some even died. It was a long journey, for the kingdom was vast, and many men found the tea in the teahouses along the way too delicious to renounce. Other men found the women in the whorehouses too... complaisant to leave behind.

At long last, only five men reached the gates of the capital city. But even then they were sidetracked. One was too tired to carry on. Another, too hungry, and had to eat, and then rest. Two more found a public bath and decided to spend a few days in it, as they could no longer stand their own foul odor.

Only one man reached the palace. He knocked, and the doors were swung open for him. The prime minister was summoned, and said: 'You're our first guest, and you're very welcome.'

Odalisques bathed him, fed him, and gave him the most luxurious chambers in which to rest.

Shortly after his arrival, it was coronation day. He was brought to a room from which he would have a vantage view of the ceremony. More guests may come, he was told, and they all would be seated there. So he took his seat and waited, while the people clamored outside.

Suddenly, a curtain was lifted in front of him, and all the kingdom's subjects came into his view. They were hailing and cheering the new king, who was no one but himself,

already sitting on the throne."

Initiation is everything, but as ever, must be taken *cum grano salis*.

In this case, is the king an initiate? Is he born to be a king? Does he come from a royal bloodline? What qualifications does he have? None whatsoever!

Maybe he's just a libertine who's managed to arrive at the palace because he didn't have enough money for the teahouses and even less so for the whorehouses. What are the Sufis telling us? That the king is not a king? Or that the king is a king? That the institution of monarchy is a joke?

And yet they go through quite some trouble to find a new "king"... Or maybe, no trouble at all. Are they telling us that initiation is worthless and may as well be avoided altogether?

Or could this be a koan, a story used in Zen-practice to cause the "great doubt?" Sufism, Zen, Taosim -- all have a repertoire of stories whose goal is to challenge our assumptions.

My guitar teacher was very proud of my having "surpassed" him within four years of taking my first lesson. He would quote Cimabue's famous utterance to his disciple Giotto...

Once Cimabue seemed to hold full sure
His own 'gainst all in art, now Giotto bears
The palm, and this man's fame doth that obscure.

--*Divine Comedy*, Purgatory - Canto 11, 94-96, Dante Alighieri, tr. E.H. Plumptre (1886)

But my teacher was disappointed when I lost interest in the instrument. I tried often to explain to him that he had taught me something far more valuable than how to play classical guitar--the dynamics between teacher and disciple; art as in the original Greek word "techni," in which "technique" is obviously paramount; respect for knowledge; discipline; the value of repetition (the 120 arpeggi by Mauro Giuliani, anyone?); patience with one's progress or lack thereof; and the very essence of methodology. All such values have stayed with me since.

My teacher died recently at the age of 97, still lucid. When he was five, he fell from the window of his parents' apartment, on the fifth floor, but incredibly got up having landed like a cat, without a scratch, saying sotto voce to the anguished bystanders: "I need to pee."

He was a great man in every respect. A true initiate.

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