

Metanoia Meets Magis at the Feet of the Guru

Received November 17, 2016

Revised December 2, 2016

Accepted December 6, 2016

Key words

Metanoia, magis, bhakti,
guru, interspirituality

In the yogic tradition, it is common for disciples to sit at the feet of their guru, receiving the teachings from a long lineage of wisdom. Jesus' disciples did the same, as did the followers of early Christian hermits. In his autobiographical essay, the author reflects how devotees turn towards the Divine at the feet of the guru, and receive an invitation to open the heart and dive deeper into the flow of life.



About the author

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I bring the palms of my hands together, fingers pointing up in prayer position. As I step towards him, he smiles. I drop to my knees, lean forward, and bring my forehead and hands to his feet. *"Thank you, Lord Jesus,"* I say silently, *"for being here in the form of the guru."* This humble act of devotion at the feet of my guru, (called *pada puja* in the ancient language of Sanskrit) serves as a metanoia moment for me.

Metanoia is a Greek word that often gets translated as "repentance". But a deeper, more contemporary understanding might define it as "a turning around" or "turning to face a new direction". Thus, metanoia is to consciously turn towards God, to orient one's life to the will of the Divine. For Christians we can say that metanoia means trying to live in alignment with the Christ Light. Placing myself at my guru's feet serves to turn and realign me with this Light. It is a place where I resolve to "put on the mind of Christ" and to follow him with a bit more heart.

In Hinduism, there is a long standing tradition of touching the feet of someone who is respected and looked up to. Children will touch the feet of their elders as a sign of reverence. Gurus will similarly have their feet touched by devotees. This act on the part of a devotee recognizes the wisdom embodied in the guru, their service to humankind, and the guru's commitment to the personal growth and transformation of his or her followers. One touches the guru's feet to show respect, reverence, love, and gratitude for all that the guru models and teaches.

The word *guru* means "remover of ignorance", and thus it is to the guru that a disciple turns to remember who they are beyond all names, titles, achievements, and status. Helping us to see clearer by removing the darkness of our ignorance, the guru reveals our True Nature – a soul created in the very image of God. All faith traditions, including Roman Catholicism, have some form of the guru-disciple relationship, where it is acknowledged that turning to someone with ample spiritual experience is necessary if one is to advance in the spiritual life. Being a disciple in some ways is like being an apprentice – a violinist, a surgeon, a plumber – working with a master to learn a craft. The guru teaches the craft and art of self-transformation. Although in Catholic circles we tend not to use the language of "guru-disciple", or even "self-transformation" such a relationship has a long history in the Christian experience.

Early Christian hermits, known as the "Desert Fathers" (and "Mothers") who inhabited the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, beginning in the third century, served as spiritual fathers and mothers to those who journeyed to their desert dwellings seeking spiritual guidance. "Abba" (*Father*) or "Amma" (*Mother*), "Give me a word", these pilgrims would plead, and the desert gurus would offer a word or phrase for them to ponder over a period of time. Along with a "word", the Abbots and Ammas sought to promote the transformation of their disciples by teaching them the spiritual discipline and practices that would remove the darkness of their ignorance, and thus advance the realization of their True Self. These early hermits and ascetics served as role models for

Saint Benedict of Nursia, who in the sixth century, wrote in his *Rule* for monks, that an abbot was to be considered as holding the place of Christ in the monastery by his fellow monks. Benedictine monks, still to this day, place their spiritual life in the hands of the abbot. It is the abbot who guides them in their spiritual journey, discerning how best to remove the ignorance that keeps the monk from Self-realization. In other words, the abbot, like the desert fathers and mothers of his wisdom lineage, serves as guru.

Over time, surrendering to the feet of my guru has become an important spiritual practice of mine. In fact, *guru-bhakti* – devotion and submission to the guru – has brought me closer to Lord Jesus, my satguru, or principal guru, the guru of all gurus. In this act of surrender, I receive a glimpse of what a radical change of heart feels like. My heart softens at my guru's feet, it opens and expands and becomes more spacious. To surrender like this, to nudge the ego into bowing to something greater than itself, helps me understand viscerally, the "purity of heart" that Jesus spoke of in his Sermon on the Mount. At the guru's feet I turn towards God.

Surrendering at the guru's feet also helps me to intuitively understand the idea of "magis", the Latin for "more", that is weaved throughout the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. To live with a spirit of magis, is to live with zeal, with a burning desire to "*know, love, and serve God more*", always thirsting for a deeper intimacy. Both metanoia and magis are moments pregnant with promise and possibility, moments that call for us to discern new ways to be courageously and

creatively engaged with the world, to be fully present to life in all its manifestations. At the guru's feet, metanoia and magis merge and all seems attainable. Thoughts are purified, doubts fade, and selfish desires disappear. The heart swells and the yearning to be more, to embrace more, overwhelms. I imagine this is how Jesus' disciples felt when they sat at his feet.

In the guru's company, my thoughts often turn to the stories in the Gospels, and how Jesus' disciples and followers would often be at his feet. I envision Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus' feet with expensive oils, and then drying them so tenderly with her hair (John 12:3). I think of Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb, when after realizing that the person she thought was the gardener was really Jesus, drops to the ground and cups his feet in her hands, "Rabboni (Master)" she sighs (Matthew 28:9). I imagine all the time Jesus' disciples sat at his feet listening to him teach and tell stories, asking questions, relaxing, enjoying his company. I think too of the Last Supper and the way in which Jesus bowed to and venerated each of his disciples by washing their feet, encouraging them to do the same, to live for others, to be more.

Having been in a guru-disciple relationship for a number of years now, I no longer feel any hesitation to bend down and take hold of the feet of my guru, who is affectionately called *Guruji* by his initiates and students (in Indian culture, "ji" is a suffix attached to a name to convey respect and affection). But as much as I love Guruji, it is not really him that I bow to. What we call "the guru" really has no body or mind. The

guru resides in each of us. It is our Highest Self, our Inner Light, the Kingdom of God within (Luke 17:21). Thus the guru in physical form is only reflecting back to the disciple that which is inside the disciple as well. The guru just helps one to see, to remember that the Divine Nature so easily seen in the guru, dwells just as fully in us. Didn't Jesus tell us this, that his Spirit will abide in us? Isn't this the gift he left us? (John 14:17).

Touching the feet of the guru is about humility and learning to surrender. I surrender to the guru in order to surrender elsewhere in life. The guru helps me cultivate a propensity to put others before myself, to consider even the smallest of daily actions as being an offering to God and neighbor. And with every offering I surrender a little more of the selfish desires that separate me from God and all that God created. At the guru's feet something deep within my heart is awakened. It is a grace filled moment where the ego withers a bit, my noblest intentions become palpable, and a greater, more complete turning towards God seems imaginable. When metanoia meets magis both God and guru delight, pleased by our desire for transcendence, as they patiently wait for the magis to be given expression.