

The abdication syndrome

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Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c (forthcoming).

2.6.1 Handing over our remote to the leader

2.6.1.1 Why do we fall for authoritarian leaders, corrupt gurus, cult personalities and charismatic teachers? Once we dedicate our lives or surrender our minds to such an authority figure, we see them as some perfect figure; we find it impossible to see or believe anything negative about them. When a Guru acts immorally, we, the followers, explain away his conduct as some kind of test or “divine play.” We are sure that there is some rational or religious reason for their conduct. Often enough, we may even blame ourselves for their conduct that only reflects our own failure: we have failed the Guru.

2.6.1.2 As in religion, so in politics: **power** attracts followers like ants to sugar, but a better metaphor is that of insects flying in the dark attracted by an open blazing fire. We feel empowered without knowing why, or refusing to see the true reasons for our own blindness. Before World War 2, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) was idolized by most Germans who saw him as an infallible figure embodying the destiny of the country. Despite their obvious brutality, figures such as Stalin (1878-1953) in Russia, Mussolini (1883-1945) in Italy, and Mao Zedong (1893-1976) in China, were worshipped and followed as heroes while they lived.

2.6.1.3 In our own time, Donald Trump (b 1946), despite his clear display of **grandiose narcissism** [5.3.3.2]—perhaps because he displays such a quality and is very wealthy—is seen by his supporters as having their best interests at heart, that he loves them and their country. His followers either explain away or deny his blatant incompetence, corruption, promiscuity and disregard for others, even international norms, to preserve their image of him as an infallible authority figure.

Trump knew just what he was saying when he proudly boasted: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK!”¹ No doubt his supporters would find a way of justifying the act, in the same way that the disciples of a Guru might try to explain away his ownership of scores of expensive cars and houses, his sexual promiscuity or his violent outbursts.

Elected as the 45th US President (2017-2021), Trump’s popularity remained stable throughout the presidency mainly because, in the midst of economic hardship and uncertainty, many Americans seemed to feel safe with an authoritarian figure, and because of the illusion of his parental care and control. However, when such a narcissist sees himself as failing, or rather as being failed by others, being plotted against, his psychopathic impulses might build up to a crescendo exploding in violence and destruction—as was evident on 6th January 2023 in Washington, DC, with the storming of the Capitol by Trump’s supporters.

When the corruptions and crimes of such a grandiose narcissist are known, the authorities may intervene (as they did in 2023).² Steve Taylor, a senior lecturer at Leeds

¹ Trump made this remark at a campaign stop at Dordt College in the city of Sioux Center, Iowa.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTACH1eVlaA>.

² <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2023/trump-criminal-investigations-cases-tracker-list/>.

Beckett University, UK, writes: “We should be grateful that, in the United States at least, there are democratic systems and processes in place to limit the disastrous effects of the abdication syndrome and the tyrants who exploit it.”³

2.6.2 Desire to return to early childhood

2.6.2.1 We are likely to recall our early childhood with love and confidence because we had the feeling that our parents were in complete control of the world. We felt that they protected us, provided for us, and took responsibility for our lives. If there were any problems, we felt that they would work them all out. If there was anything we did not know or understand, they would tell us the answer or how to sort things out. We didn’t have to worry about anything: we went to school, played, had fun, rested; they comforted us and took care of everything else.

Steve Taylor, in his article, “Abdication Syndrome,” writes

I remember being disappointed when I was [a] little older, perhaps 11 or 12, and began to realise that my parents weren’t as omnipotent and omniscient as I’d thought. One day I asked my father a question about my school homework and I was surprised when he couldn’t help me. I began to realise that my dad was actually a very anxious person who constantly worried about the smallest things. But by that point, I was beginning to feel independent, so I no longer need [sic] their protection so much.

For many people, this phase of early childhood represents an ideal *which they long to return to* (if only subconsciously). How wonderful it would be to worship powerful parental figures, who take responsibility for our own lives, protect us from the world, and provide answers to all our questions.

(S Taylor, “The abdication syndrome,” *Psychology Today* 12 Sep 2020)

2.6.2.2 A common trope or strategy cult leaders use to rally support and attract followers for themselves is to ostensibly urge a return to an ideal state, the “golden age.” Although this may be seen as a “pure, pristine” Buddhism, for example, the real cult activity is not the keeping of moral conduct, wholesome meditation, or sutta study for personal cultivation. Cult activities tend to be ostentatious and ritualistic with only one subtle or overt goal: the glorification of the cult leader.

Although many people seek teachers and teachings because of a genuine desire for spiritual development, many others are motivated by unhealthy impulses. They may seem to be seeking “enlightenment,” but this is really a return to **a childhood state** of unconditioned devotion and non-responsibility (even irresponsibility). In 2020, Steve Taylor coined the term “**abdication syndrome**” [2.6.2.1], and explained it as follows:

They want to abdicate responsibility for their own lives, and hand it over to the guru or cult leader. They don’t have to worry about anything, because the guru will guide them in the right direction. They don’t need to think for themselves, because the leader knows all the answers. They don’t need to struggle in their lives; they can just

³ S Taylor, “The abdication syndrome,” *Psychology Today* 1 May 2020: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/out-of-the-darkness/202305/why-some-people-hand-their-lives-over-to-cults>.

bask in the love and protection of the guru, *as they did with their parents when they were young children*. I call this impulse the “abdication syndrome.”

(S Taylor, “The abdication syndrome,” *Psychology Today* 1 May 2023)

Taylor, in his book, *DisConnected* (2023),⁴ explores the abdication syndrome in more detail. He suggests that the syndrome is so powerful that it gives rise to a specific altered state of consciousness—or as we could call it, an abdicated state of consciousness.

R840 Inspiration 490

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⁴ Taylor, *DisConnected: the roots of human cruelty and how connection can heal the world*, Aberdour (Scotland): Iff Books, 2023.