

Perfectly Human

Perfect Wisdom Can Flow Through Imperfect Teachers

By Dan Ofstedal – December 12, 2025 ¹

*There is a crack in everything,
that's how the light gets in.* — Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

I watched myself do it again last week. The same pattern I've seen a hundred times, even talked and written about, the one I supposedly understand and have worked through. I felt the old familiar feeling of it, knew exactly what was happening, and still couldn't stop myself. The awareness was there, but the freedom to behave differently wasn't.

I felt an inner contradiction—like I'd failed some spiritual test. But then I remembered: it is possible to glimpse and understand profound truth while still being tangled in conditioning.

Insight and integration are not the same thing.

Awakening doesn't end struggle.

None of our spiritual understanding and practice is meant to deny that we are fully human, experiencing life as such—with all its messiness and limitation. And many of the great teachers who've shaped spirituality illuminate this not despite their flaws, but through them.

Alan Watts

Alan Watts—mystic and trickster—brought Zen, Taoism, and non-duality to the West with unmatched clarity. He saw straight through the illusion of separateness. Yet he drank heavily, struggled with personal relationships, and often contradicted what he taught about awareness and presence.

The lesson isn't that Watts was a hypocrite. It's that awakening to oneness does not magically undo our conditioning. Seeing clearly does not mean living flawlessly. Watts himself captured this: “You are under no obligation to be the same person you were five minutes ago.”

He taught brilliantly and still struggled, fully aware of his own contradictions. We don't need to be perfect to speak truth.

Kahlil Gibran

Kahlil Gibran, whose words have carried millions toward compassion and unity, lived with turbulence and loneliness, and died of cirrhosis of the liver. “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars,” he wrote. His life embodied this truth: the wound and the wisdom are inseparable.

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Gibran didn't transcend suffering to write *The Prophet*—he wrote it through suffering, because of it. The light entered through the cracks.

The Problem of Charisma

The paradox grows sharper—and more troubling—with teachers whose charisma outpaced their integration. Osho spoke with piercing psychological clarity about freedom and ego-dissolution, yet became engulfed in scandals and the shadow play of an adoring community. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche founded Naropa University and brought Vajrayana Buddhism to the West, yet drank heavily and engaged in exploitative relationships with students—which he justified as “crazy wisdom.”

There's a line here worth drawing clearly: struggling with personal demons is one thing; causing harm to others is another. One deserves compassion; the other demands accountability. Yet even these troubling examples force us to ask: Can teaching be separated from teacher? Can a person touch transcendence while their ego remains dangerously intact?

Their insights were real. Their failures were real. Both truths coexist.

The Christian Context

The pattern becomes even darker in contexts where the gap between proclaimed virtue and hidden shadow is widest. Traditional Christian authority structures have frequently prized outward virtue, moral judgment of others, and institutional control rather than liberation from self. The shadow—desire, attachment, secret indulgence—gets hidden rather than brought to light and acknowledged. The result is predictable: televangelists like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart preaching prosperity and purity while enriching themselves and concealing affairs; Catholic priests whose moral authority masked systematic abuse.

Here the distinction sharpens further: these may not be teachers who struggled with integrating genuine insight—they may have been grifters from the start, wielding spiritual language as a tool for power and exploitation. When humility is absent and the performance of moral superiority replaces honest reckoning with one's humanity, the shadow doesn't just persist—it becomes predatory.

Integration Over Time

Other teachers show a different arc—struggle integrated rather than merely endured. Ram Dass moved from psychedelic highs to a life of devotion and service, his stroke later becoming a doorway to deeper surrender. Thomas Merton wrestled with desire and attachment, turning those struggles into compassion and prose that inspired millions.

These teachers—and many others—remind us that the path is not static. Insight can suddenly open the heart, but integration slowly reshapes it. As Ram Dass put it, “We're all just walking each other home.” And the teachers aren't walking ahead of us, they are walking together with us.

Humility is the Key

The real danger is not imperfection—it's pretending not to have any. When teachers claim purity or moral invincibility, the shadow goes underground, where it is much more dangerous.

Jesus understood this: “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” And: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Keep in mind that Jesus was much more at home with so-called sinners than with the priestly class.

Humility is the true mark of spiritual maturity. Not denial. Not the performance of virtue. In fact, humility *is a virtue*. It cannot coexist with sanctimony and hypocrisy. And it creates the space in which honest transformation can occur.

Walking Each Other Home

Insight and integration are different processes, often unfolding on separate timelines. Realization doesn't erase fear or desire. The human and the divine coexist in strange proximity—and always will.

This offers something profoundly freeing: you don't need to achieve perfection to teach, serve, or help others. You don't need to dissolve every contradiction to glimpse and share truth.

When I falter or fall back into old patterns, these lives comfort me. I remember that it is possible to understand deeply and still struggle. To teach honesty and still wrestle with conditioning. To be both cracked and luminous.

We are fellow travelers, flawed as we are, stumbling toward clarity and understanding. And if the great teachers have shown anything, it's that we can walk each other home while being imperfect—and perfectly human.