

## MASTER/SLAVE RELATIONSHIPS

### The Two World Problem

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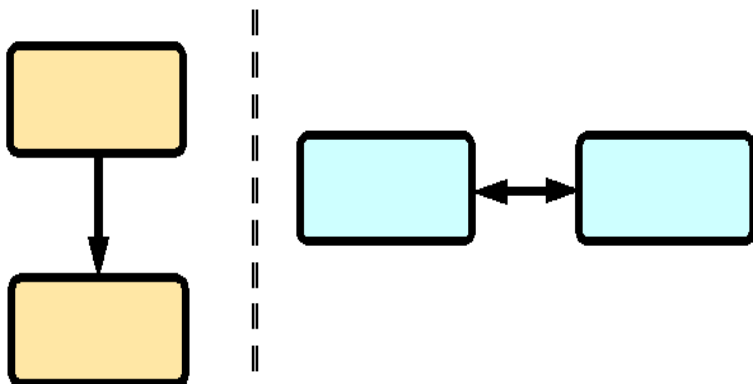
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There are two ways for people to get along in this world.

One looks like this. And the other looks like this.

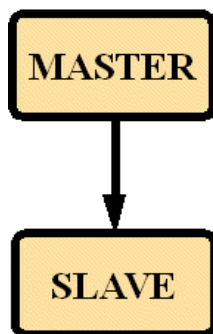


In the first, one person is above the other, with communication going from the upper to the lower. In the second people are side by side, with communication going both ways.

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### THE MOST FAMILIAR

The one on the left, the up/down relationship, is by far the most familiar to us all. And so I will talk about it first. We see it in business, in government, and in families. I think we see it so much because it has the tone of EFFICIENCY, and modern culture almost worships efficiency. Before I explain what makes it seem efficient, let me give names to the two people. I call the upper person the **Master**, and the lower one the **Slave**.



I have been using these labels for about 7 years. At first I picked them only because the words evoked a strong reaction in people, and I think that is useful when teaching. After a while, people actually began to object to my words. ([Check out the controversies here.](#)) They did not want to be labeled or they already had other uses for the words. I didn't blame them. Of course, I was speaking of "ways of relating," and not about labeling people. But then, I looked deeper at the use of the term and found that two great philosophers used the same terms for the same issues: Hegel and Aristotle. So I guessed I was in good company and kept the terms – Master and Slave.

Now, back to the question, why does a Master/Slave relationship seem efficient? Because in it decisions (not necessarily good ones) can be made very quickly. And often quick decisions are important to a group of people

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### THE TRUTH SYSTEM

How are decisions made quickly? A Master/Slave relationship has a feature I call a Truth System – a method, an algorithm, a way of determining the truth, the correct thing, the right thing, what's real, what's important, what is a fact, what should be done. This truth system determines all the black and white things, what is absolute. How does it work? If you want to know what is the true – you ask the Master. What's correct? you ask the Master. What is really going on? Ask the Master. What should be done? Ask the Master. You never ask the Slave. It is the position of the Master, and the structure of the Master/Slave relationship that determines the point-of-view that is selected.

If a couple wants to decide whether they are going to go into town on a Saturday afternoon, they simply turn to the Master. The Master says, "Yes" or "No," and the decision is made – in a quarter second.

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### UNSTABLE

While a Master/Slave relationship is efficient, it is also quite unstable. It falls apart all the time. You can see this all around you. What makes it so? The Slave does.

First, Masters never know when the Slave is going to rebel. Slaves always rebel sooner or later. Think of the great slave rebellions in history: from Spartacus to the American Revolution and up the present! To maintain "stability" Masters have to be prepared and on the lookout for the first sign of rebellion. I'll talk about this more later.

Second source of instability is in the poor quality of the decisions made. In a Master/Slave relationship, the Master makes all the decisions; however, they do not have all the data upon which to base good decisions. Both Master and Slave have lots of data. But Slaves are not talking. They are typically quiet, and are told to be. Thus the Master can not take advantage of the Slave's information, and tends to make poor decisions. Amazingly the Slave often knows more about what is going on than Masters do. Slaves know what they themselves know and they know what the Master knows since the Master talks. For making good quality decisions a Master/Slave relationship is not best.

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### PUNISHMENT SYSTEM

Because the Master is anticipating rebellion, and rebellion makes the relationship unstable, Master/Slave relationship have another feature that attempts to improve stability. I call it the Punishment System and it creates the painful things that happen or are threatened to happen to the Slave, if the Slave does not go along with the point of view of the Master. It is the hurt that happens to the Slave if they do not "agree" with the Master.

Now, the punishment system comes in two forms: downward or outward.

### PUSH DOWNWARD

Downward punishment refers to lowering the rank or status of the Slave. This includes shaming, ridiculing, put-downs, humiliation, derogation, etc. The shaming can be very subtle or quite obvious. "You don't agree?" is subtle. "All sane people would agree with me!" is more obvious. "You're an idiot!" is very obvious. When I was a young, and would argue with my father, he would dismiss me by saying, "You're just a kid, what do you know." I felt "put down." Later, in High School, he told me I was just an adolescent. Again I felt "put down."

Downward pressure also includes lowering the rank of a person within some hierarchy or structure. In a company this might mean a demotion. "If you talk that way, you risk that promotion." In the military it might mean lowering your pay grade. In a family it might mean being reminded you are "just a kid". In a community meeting it might mean saying, "You are n outsider. What do you know!" In civilian life we lower the rank of felons by taking away their vote.

I think it worth mentioning that threat is just as effective as actual punishment. The brain is designed to recall things that lead up to pain and learns to react to the warning of pain just as quickly as to the actual pain. I knew a father who controlled his family by just clicking his tongue. They knew what pain would follow if they did not jump to it, now!

Threat of put-down seems an artwork in our culture. Just turn on talk radio or TV. "Any sane person knows that ...." Here's a message that is a threat to anyone who disagrees. If you speak up, you are already labeled "insane." "Every patriot supports the war in Iraq!" Here's a threat to anyone who disagrees. If you speak up, you are labeled anti-patriotic.

### **PUSH OUTWARD**

Outward punishment, or outward threat, refers to disconnecting the slave from the relationship or community. We have many words for this. In a company, this would be firing. In the military, this would be a discharge. In a church, it is excommunication. In a community, it is to ostracize or shun. In a country, it is to exile. In a group, it is to cancel membership. In a meeting, it is dismissal. In a family, it is "go to your room!" or "get out of here!" or "keep your mouth closed!" or "I'm not talking to you." In a marriage, it is separation, refusal to talk, or ultimately divorce.

Or again all these things can be threatened with just as much powerful effect. The most famous threat in the United State is the phrase, "My way or the highway." This phrase is so common that it has become an adjective. "My dad had been a Marine, and he was a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy."

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### **HOW TO RECOGNIZE A MASTER – SLAVE RELATIONSHIP?**

When a couple walks into my room or even when one member of a partnership comes it, I can usually recognize a Master/Slave relationships by two symptoms or signs.

### **SILENCE**

If someone complains about silence, I expect to find a Master/Slave problem. A relatively stable Master/Slave relationship (remember Master/Slave relationships are inherently unstable) will have communication going only in one way from Master to Slave. The Slave will have learned to be silent about any disagreement. The Slave will be keeping their differing points of view secret. The typical Master does not notice at first, but in more mature relationships I often hear things like, "I can't find out what she wants" Or "He won't tell me. He's quiet all the time."

(By the way, I think this is a pretty good definition of agreement: one person thinks there is agreement, but is in some level of delusion. Their partner knows there is no agreement, but is keeping silent about it. From this emerges the one-liner: "If two people are agreeing, then at least one of them is lying - withholding their truth.")

This silence is one thing that makes Master/Slave Relationships unstable. The decision-maker is uninformed, and is often critically in delusion about what is going on in their partner.

When I am working with an individual in a relationship, I often focus on this problem. If they mention something their partner does that they don't understand, I invite them to share why they don't know what is going on in their partner. When they share, "He/she won't tell me" I then PreValidate the non-present and non-speaking partner and move to teaching about Master/Slave. "Of course they don't tell you. You are probably a pain in the neck to talk to. Let's see if we can figure this out."

Silence is so major a problem that I often give people a couple of one-liners to help them learn. The one reason a person is quiet is that it is not safe for them to talk. The one reason a person lies is that it is not safe for them to tell the truth.

### **ARGUMENT**

The most common sign of a Master/Slave Relationship is an argument. Simply put, an argument is two people trying to be Master at the same time. And both are using Punishment systems, trying to pain their partner into pretending agreement, with varying success. If you are arguing, then you are probably trying to establish your "Truth" as the only truth, and get

you partner to appear to agree. Arguing is the verbal behavior of two bullies. (A bully is a person who wants their way and will cause pain for others if they don't get it.)

Arguing is admired in our culture. People often express their power and strength in arguments. Our TV and politics are full of arguments. Yet almost all couples who come into my office state that arguing is a problem. What I have come to believe is that couples are often more mature than the culture they live in.

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### SUMMARY OF Master/Slave Relationship

This is the common way of relating that evolved from a need for efficiency. Used by couples, it is a source of distress, arguing, and resentment. While efficient, it is unstable, painful, and does not provide for the intimacy that couples hope to find in a love relationship.

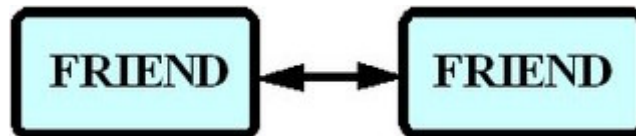
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### THE ALTERNATIVE TO MASTER/SLAVE

Many people don't seem to be aware that there is an alternative. I hear people say, "Either I have to fight or I lose and have to be quiet." Yet there is another way.

A couple hundred years ago there occurred on the face of the earth a event – called the American Revolution. This revolution, I believe, was brought on by an "allergic reaction to being Slave." "No taxation without representation," etc. People identified themselves as Slaves to an unfair Master and said, "No more." This is a very powerful effect, and if you want to take a look at it in detail, consider teenagers. "I don't care what you say, Dad, I'm not going to do it."

Out of this rebellious allergic reaction was born a 1-person, 1-vote way of relating, or Democracy - a way of relating that I call Friend/Friend.



Notice that both members of the relationship are on the same level and that communication flows in both direction. (Also I am certainly aware that the American Revolution was not the first occurrence of this rebellious impulse in the world. I believe it goes back to hunter-gatherers millennia ago. But I use the American Revolution as a dramatic example.)

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### UNFAMILIAR

While Master/Slave Relationships are very familiar, Friend/Friend Relationships seem quite unfamiliar. Americans love talking about their democracy, and I think we have been growing in our awareness of what democracy implies. While democracy has its political aspects, I think it is in one-to-one relationships, in marriages, partnerships and families where its biggest revolutions are occurring.

One place Friend/Friend Relationship occurs is during the dating and Romantic Stage of relationships. We commonly see Friend/Friend here, but we tend to overlook it, when perhaps this should be a clue to what is going on in an Intimate Relationship.

### STABLE

Friend/Friend Relationships, if you know how to make them work, are very stable and last forever. The simple reason is that this is a WIN-WIN relationship. Nothing can happen unless both parties vote "Yes". Thus everybody wins all the time. Who would want to leave a relationship like that?

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### INEFFICIENT

Friend/Friend Relationships have several significant problems. The first problem is that it is massively inefficient. A simple decision that would take a couple a half second in a Master/Slave Relationship, may take weeks to negotiate. (If you want to compare Master/Slave and Friend/Friend relationships on the political scene, consider the U.S. Presidency vs. the U.S. Congress. The former is built around Master/Slave and the latter is based on Friend/Friend. I have never known a U.S. president who did not complain about the slowness of the Congress. Yet, I believe it is the Congress that provides the stability to the United States.)

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### REQUIRES PATIENCE

Because Friend/Friend is inefficient (in the short term) and slow, living in it requires the skill of patience. Now, as I have come to learn it, no child is born patient. Patience is not a survival trait for infants. "I gotta eat now," says the three day-old baby. I understand that patience is an adult skill – not a personality trait. It is a skill meant to be learned during growing up. The ideal time to learn it, I've heard, is around the age of seven. Take a seven-year-old boy. Put him with a group of adults who are displaying patience, and the kid will easily develop the mature skill of patience.

When I was seven, I couldn't find an adult with patience within 50 miles. So I did not learn patience until I was about 45. And I am still learning. When I see a traffic light that I can miss, that I can stop and wait through, I slow down. It's practice. It's taking short vacations during my day. Till I was 45 I had never examined my own level of maturity around patience. I can look back on hundreds of foolish things I did between 8 and 46 because I was so impatient. Are you impatient? Is your partner? Well, I suggest you consider your impatience is as an infantile trait. I am not interested in blaming you. No one taught you how to be patient. So learn now! Go take a course in patience. I think this is a very wise investment.

Impatient people have significant trouble with staying in a Friend/Friend Relationship. I believe that they naturally slide over into Master/Slave in order to meet their needs for haste. If you want to stay in, or retrieve, a Friend/Friend Relationship, I suggest you develop patience. You will need it.

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### MULTIPLE TRUTHS

The second great difficulty with the Friend/Friend Relationship is that there is "NO TRUTH." Most people have never seen a situation where there is no truth. For them this is really unfamiliar territory.

Now, I certainly believe in the Truth of God, etc. But I am fully aware that each of us has a different view on those Truths. Specialists in this field of study, General Semantics, refer to WIGO or "What is Going On". They point out that there is such a thing as WIGO, but no one knows what it is. Everyone just has their point of view of WIGO. If I want truth, I have to look into my heart or my soul. I will find my truth. If I speak to you, I share my version of that Truth – my truth.

Which version of the Truth is the right one? One way of looking at it is that each person thinks their version is the best at any given moment. I repeat, each person's current view is the best they have at that moment.

Another way of stating the problem is that with only one vote per person, there is no way to choose one of those "best" truths as THE "best" truth.

This brings up the issue of "agreement." One way of saying it is "that there is no such thing as agreement," since two point of view are never completely identical. At some level of detail there is always difference and disagreement. Another way of looking at it is that "agreement" is a decision on both parts that their points of view seem close enough so that proceeding to action is a safe bet. "My thoughts seem pretty close to yours! Let's do it."

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## THE JOURNEY OF COUPLES

Most couples who come to see me started their relationships in Friend/Friend and then at some critical point, they switched to Master/Slave and have been there, fighting, ever since. They fall in love, are buddies and then move into a house where they start to argue over what is "right". When I show them the structure of Master/Slave and Friend/Friend, they want to get back to where they started. Now, I believe this is quite possible.

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## COMMUNICATION STYLES

One thing I noted was that the way people talk in a Master/Slave Relationship is fundamentally different from that in a Friend/Friend Relationship.

### MASTER TALK

In M/S people use what I call MasterTalk. I gave it a name because I found that once you start to note it, it is pretty easy to see – it almost seems objective. I define Master Talk as any sentence that implies a single truth. "It is cold in here." "We had a good weekend." "Terrorists are evil." "You are cheating." The Master form of MasterTalk are absolute statements of "truth."

*\* MasterTalk - Any sentence that implies there is only a single way to see the truth.*

Slaves use another form of MasterTalk. It still involves a sentence that implies a single truth, but Slaves say that they don't have the "truth". Slaves ask questions (of Masters) to invoke that absolute "Truth". "What are we going to do today?" "What really is going on?" "What should I do?" "What is the right word."

The most common Slave form of MasterTalk is the phrase "I don't know." It implies there is something to be known, and that the Slave doesn't have it.

Amazingly I noticed that the purpose of Master Talk is not to communicate data. I think its purpose is to test and reaffirm the current stability of the ever unstable Master/Slave Relationship. When a Master makes a dogmatic statement, I think they are (consciously or unconsciously) testing the people around to see if they are in a willing or rebellious mood. I say, "It is hot in here," and then I wait to see if anyone objects or rebels. If the room is silent, I stay relaxed. If someone objects, I have to bring out my Punishment System. I repeat. I think MasterTalk is about maintaining stability in an inherently unstable relationship. MasterTalk is all about persuading, or signaling that I have been persuaded, that an "idea is best for us".

Certain words can clue you into MasterTalk: "is", "know", "the fact that", "reality", "we" or "you"

[Click here](#) for further discussion of MasterTalk.

## DIALOGUE

The Friend/Friend communication style is called dialogue. I define dialogue as any sentence that implies the existence of multiple truths, multiple points of view, and also recalls that each person thinks their point of view is best at this moment. "I like broccoli. What do you like?" "I think Bush is a good president. Do you have any thought on the subject." "I hear what you like AND this is what I like." Dialogue is all about sharing data and encouraging independent decisions on what is "best for each."

**\* Dialogue - Any sentence that implies there are multiple ways of seeing the truth.**

Many words can signal that dialogue is being used. The word "I" is used frequently. The word "know" is replaced by "believe", "recall", "remember", "think", "imagine", "guess", "get it that". "We" is replaced by "I think (believe, etc) that we..." The word "you" is replaced by "I imagine that you...", "I get the impression that you...." My favorite phrase is "That is my belief. Best that I've got. Of course, my belief plus a dollar get me a poor cup of coffee. What do you believe?" I am acknowledging that I am aware that my point of view, good as I think it is, has no intrinsic value for anyone else.

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## LANGUAGE IN OUR CULTURE

MasterTalk is so common in the media and at home that it seems almost automatic. I think it is the most common kind of communication that children hear from adults. Dialogue usually must be taught to adults who have lived in this country. When I work with couples I use Mirroring and Intentional Dialogue to teach dialogue. In the process I help them unlearn MasterTalk.

What makes teaching Dialogue easier is that it seems more natural. The process of dialogue matches well with the internal self-awareness of human brains. "I'm different," we all know at birth. Communication that acknowledges differences is natural. I think it is Master Talk that has to be taught. Our culture has to work hard to teach Master/Slave, i.e. obedience. If you want to study MasterTalk, and Master/Slave training tools in their magnificence, examine the practices of military boot camp. In 10 weeks a man or woman is trained to know at the automatic level the brilliance of Master/Slave. "At any moment there is only one person present who's opinion matters - the senior person present." It is no wonder that teaching dialogue, Friend/Friend, or other relationships skills to the ex-military is often so difficult.

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## BENEFITS

What are the benefits of a Friend/Friend relationship? Well, there is always that WIN-WIN, that sense of fairness. There is also the long-term stability.

Master/Slave Relationships have the benefits of efficiency.

A Master has the benefit of feeling the center of attention and having a sense of control. This latter seems the more important. Many times I see people who had no control as children, and who grow up to value that sense of control in their relationship. True the control comes at a price of having to use the Punishment System and also all that instability. I find that some people who have been in the Master position often want to quit. They sense it isn't working.

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## VICTIMICITY

What, you may ask, makes a person stay in the Slave position for so long. Slaves have no responsibility. In a Master/Slave system, all responsibility resides with the Master. Slaves are "innocent", child-like and are not to be held accountable. Self-responsibility is an adult trait which slaves avoid. I think this is the advantage of being slave or "victim". "He told me to do it." "He makes me." "She forces me." "I had to do it." "I can't say that." Or the ubiquitous, "He hurt my feelings." "I don't know what to do. Tell me!" Each is an example of pushing away responsibility for the speaker's own decisions. I think it is a little like going out to dinner with someone, the waiter puts two checks on the table and your partner slyly pushes their check over to your side when you aren't looking. Slaves avoid responsibility for their own actions.

Now in a Friend/Friend relationship, all people are responsible all the time. There is no time when you are not responsible. But this means that people have to get clear on who is responsible for what. This is the subject of Boundary skills that you hear so much of. Friends are responsible for their actions and their reactions as well. Friends are also responsible to assist other people with their responsibilities. In the Master/Slave relationship, boundaries are completely confused as only the Master has responsibility.

[Click here](#) for a thorough discussion of Boundaries.

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## EMPATHY

One of the most important human attributes is Empathy. A good definition is the ability to relate to the inner world of another person as different from your own. This attribute is pretty much only found in Friend - Friend relationships. "I see how you feel and I feel differently." The word AND is important.

In Master - Slave relationships empathic behavior is rare. Master's rarely know what a slave's world is like or that their world even exists. Slaves tend to demonstrate sympathy. This is the tendency to feel what others are feeling or to see your world as somehow mixed up with the other's world. "I get so upset when you get upset."

It is the lack of empathy that allows Master's to punish their partners. Masters tend to be blind to how they come across to others. An argument is about two people, lacking empathy, who are defending themselves while hurting, punishing, the other --- all without much awareness.

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## PASSIVE MASTERS

An interesting phenomenon occurs when a person doesn't want to be responsible and yet isn't willing to accept the position of slave. They want control, but not responsibility. In this situation the person uses their Punishment System only, but doesn't say what they want - the Truth System. The Passive Master "punishes" by shaming others for "being mean", or "hurtful", or "thoughtless", etc. They may consciously or unconsciously produce emotional or illness outbursts. They may have migraines or attacks of fibromyalgia. This hurting comes whenever someone does what the Passive Master doesn't want. Passive Masters often appear frail or "over sensitive." I find these people in families where everyone is trying to not "upset" or "hurt" the Passive Master.

I once interviewed a couple who visited his parent's family in Butte Montana. I asked them to describe to two. "Dad is a powerful man in the community. He runs three businesses with about 90 employees. He is on many of the boards of agencies in the city. Mom is pretty sickly. She stays at home most of the time. She hasn't had a job except raising us." Then I asked, "Who runs the family, who is boss?" They both looked at each other for a moment and then simultaneously said, "Mom!"



A nice example of a Passive Master is those people who smoke cigarettes and sue tobacco companies. The trick is to remain a victim while being dominant. (For a full presentation on Passive Masters and on all the problems of passivity, see my paper on the [Power of Passivity](#)).

#### MASTER/SLAVE SUMMARY

##### Summary

- Familiar
- Ideal for the impatient
- Delusion - Truth/Clarity
- Delusion - Agreement
- Low-anxiety for Master
- Illusion of the Master being in control
- Irresponsibility for Slave
- Enmeshed boundaries
- Victimicity & Blame
- Unstable, falls apart
- Needed when efficiency is critical.

#### FRIEND/FRIEND SUMMARY

##### Summary

- Very inefficient, slow
- Requires the skill of patience
- No truth! Multiple truths.
- **Dialogical**\*
- All people are responsible all the time
- Requires boundary skills
- Sharing Differences
- Safe for all
- Shared control
- PreValidation
- Very reliable in the long-term

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#### WHEN/WHY TO USE WHICH: MASTER/SLAVE or FRIEND/FRIEND

##### EFFICIENCY

There are many situations where efficiency is highly desirable. In those situations, successful partnerships will automatically organize into Master/Slave relationships. Some examples are sailing a ship, flying an airplane, driving a car, a competitive business or sport, fighting a fire or a war.

When next you fly, note the Master/Slave shift when the plane starts to land. All the passengers (slaves) seat-belted in. The pilot (Master) lands the plane. Just try standing up during landing and watch the Punishment System emerge. When the task is over, after the plane lands, the pilot comes out and shake hands with the passengers and thanks them – Friend/Friend.

### **EXPERIENCE**

Any task where there is one person with much more experienced at that specific task usually develops, naturally and comfortably, into Master/Slave – for the duration of the task. Some examples are teaching, construct work, etc.

I once watched three men; an electrician, a plumber, and a carpenter take turns at being Master. It was bathroom remodeling job. The plumber made the decisions about how and where to locate piping and the commode. Then the electrician spoke of where to run the wiring for the bathroom heater. And finally the carpenter told them how the flooring and supports would go in. Each was “expert” in their part of the task. Each was familiar with the relevant building codes for his part.

This type of Master/Slave relationship works well and is characterized by focus on a task and the positions (Master and Slave) are temporary. The group’s focus on the task makes the punishment system mostly unnecessary.

### **PROPERTY**

Any time that property is involved the owner is in the Master situation. “It is my car and I decide what will happen to it.” Buying can be seen as two Masters coming together peacefully to negotiate trade of property.

### **JOINT RESPONSIBILITY**

I think that Friend/Friend is the appropriate relationship style when at least one member of the team thinks efficiency is not required. A family is an ideal place for Friend/Friend as everyone share the responsibility for the health and happiness of the members.

### **COMMUNICATION**

Whenever full communication is needed, a shift to Friend/Friend is a good idea.

### **DEMOCRACY**

I think that any situation other than agreed on need for efficiency, experience differences or property issues need the skills of Friend/Friend.

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## **ARE YOU A MASTER, A SLAVE, A FRIEND**

No one IS a Master or Slave or Friend. I use each of these to represent a position in a specific relational transaction.

A MasterTalk (Master form) statement is sent from the Master part of a person to the Slave part of another person. If the other person responds from a Slave position, then all seems well. A Friend (Dialogical) statement is sent from the Friend part of a person to another Friend.

An individual can easily shift from the Master to the Slave position in short time and back again.

I think the goal is to use MasterTalk only when one of the valid reasons for Master/Slave exists. The rest of the time, I believe, people are better to use Dialogue.

And I think you can either be in one or the other at any given moment. I believe you can either be in

Master/Slave (comfortably when it is functional or uncomfortably when it is dysfunctional) or in Friend/Friend. "You can either be right or in relationship. Take your pick."

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To Stop all arguments: a) develop the skill of patience, b) recognize and avoid all MasterTalk using [Mirroring](#), c) develop [Diversity and PreValidation](#) skills, d) become a master [Boundary Skills](#). That's it!

[Click here](#) for examples of how to deal with MasterTalk when you are a Friend and want to stay there in Friend/Friend.

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