

Kurt F. Leidecker

Mary Washington College, Virginia

ORIGIN AND FUNCTION OF THE GURU

The concept of *guru* as spiritual friend and guide with all its melioristic and pejorative aspects has, since its inception, undergone many changes, conditioned largely by circumstances social, economic and cultural. In examining the earliest and pre-Buddhistic literature of India it will appear that highly personal concepts had also cosmic overtones which then were lost in later periods. To get at the root of the concept under discussion it is necessary to lay away some of the traditional well-worn ideas in comparative religion text books about various forms of theism and priestcraft and, if possible, practice a little empathy with man of the Vedic period.

Take, for instance, the superbly spiritual "prayers" of Rigveda 1, 90, 6-8 or Atharvaveda 7, 69 which literally breathe the sheer joy of man's imbeddedness in nature—the winds, rivers, the sun, the dust of the earth, trees and herbs, day and night. Man's moods are nature's moods. The "prayers" are really not *for*-something; they are not addressed to powers outside and above man. They are the ground swell of an expectation, a self-assurance without benefit of clergy. Nature, inclusive of man, is the teacher, the *guru*. Everyone is both teacher and taught.¹ *Gurupūjā*, veneration of a *guru*, does not come into play here. The experience is typical for an age in which the "archaic identity of man and universe" predominates awareness in an "aperspective" world which has been so persuasively postulated by Jean Gebser.²

Soon this paradisiacal state became invaded by economic necessities as the Gangetic valley became settled. An ordered and structured

1. Cf. in this connection an article by Richard I. Hudson: "Nature, the External Guru," in *Special Supplement, Vedanta Bulletin* of the Vedanta Society of Greater Washington, 12, 4 (March 1980).

2. *Ursprung und Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 1966).

society evolved. Families and *gotras* were consolidated and tradition was established to insure the continuity of society. Education was recognized as the best guarantor for that. Therefore the *kulapati*, the head of the household, assumed the duty of teaching the new generation. Instruction in proper behavior and thought patterns led to the development of a value system, an ethic, which became more and more elaborate and taxed the ability of the householder to handle abstract problems arising largely from the symbolic use of language and emotional needs.

The Indian love of classification and systematization led to specialization in the growing social complexity and produced the prototype of the *guru* in the form of a *kulaguru* attached to the household who put greater emphasis on the spiritual aspects of his educational efforts. Practical consideration eventually brought it about that the *guru* gathered about him *śishyas*, pupils, who went to him in his woodland *aśrama*, his *tapovana*. The first *gurus* in the true sense of the word may have been the *kulapatis* who had entered the fourth stage of the householder in the social scheme. The solitude which they enjoyed in groves and forests however engendered introversion and stimulated prolonged reflection. The profoundest problems of life and existence appeared to their mental eye in ever increasing urgency calling for solutions and challenges.

“Reflecting” on the archaic unity of man and nature, still a vital part of their experience close to nature and the absence of such feelings in an urbanized environment from which they had retired, they became keenly aware of the need to evaluate these feelings and find a synthesis, if possible. In actuality they orchestrated a reconciliation between the consciousness of archaic unity of man and nature and the logic of a rising consciousness of dualism, bifurcation and polarity, the essence of a type of consciousness or awareness still with us.

Indians, always metaphysically inclined, would flock to the hermitages as the drama of a new dimension of consciousness and with it a new lifestyle was unfolding and was being reconciled to the old or traditional awareness. We read about this ferment particularly in the Upanishads when kings became philosophers, women expert debators and social revolutions were in the making as when the lower castes were given access to “higher” education in esoteric knowledge. In

this context the question was raised on the basis of the new awareness of how the individual, his being and his self, were related to the world now interpreted as "objective". The Rishis of old had no problem with this because they "had their being" in a unitary world. The sages of the Upanishadic age in which this sense of oneness was in decline, struggled to "save" it intellectually and emotionally.

They did so by coming up with the deepest insight which has since fascinated philosophers and religious persons everywhere: The self of man, *ātman*, is identical with the spiritual essence of the All, (read "God" if you like), with *Brahman*. The word was spoken, and we can hear a numinous shudder: *Tat tvam asi*, That art thou! Knowing better realizing this became the key to liberation, *mokṣa*, complete freedom in *ānanda*, within the new awareness that characterizes the new age. This thought lies at the core of all teachings of the *gurus*, no matter what their shortcomings, no matter what their method. From this function, derives the *gurupūjā*, the reverence (not worship) of the *guru*, as well as his being considered godlike by some. It is precisely because of the *grave* and *weighty* message which the *guru* is carrying that he is called the "*guru*", the *heavy* one", if we may indulge in some etymologizing.

Ideally the *guru* conveys his *śishyas* from the contemporary level of general dualistic awareness to the archaic level, contemptuously called "primitive." Heinrich Zimmer's characterization of the Tāntric *guru* fits into our interpretation, that a *guru* is the "custodian of the archetypes in the collective subconscious."³ The *guru* is thus more than an *ācharya*, a teacher or authority on spiritual subjects; he also is more than an *upadeśaka*, one who merely informs about spiritual matters. Least of all is he a delegate or representative of a deity.⁴ He is a *path*, a "path" or guide whose function it is—if so requested—to lead one from darkness into light, *tamasoma jyotir gamaya*, as the *Great Forest Treatise*⁵ says so beautifully. Especially in times of crisis and distress the *guru* is sought out by the *sādakas*, students and aspirants. A *guru* is indispensable when there is a proliferation of mystery religions and eclectic tendencies which

3. In *Eranos Jahrbuch 1933*: "Zur Bedeutung des Indischen Tantra-Yoga."

4. Although in the *Bhagavad Gītā* Krishna is both deity and *guru*.

5. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 5, 1, 1.

obscure and often misconstrue the original intent and substance of a *guru's* message.

Passages such as "blind men led by one who is himself blind"⁶ imply that there were false *gurus* even in the days of the earliest Upanishads. The Carvakas, those that walk with the common herd, of course need no *guru*, being materialistic. Likewise one who already "knows God" requires no guide, nor does one who regards God or the Truth unknowable. The *guru* concept has been copied by others apart from the numerous schools of Indian philosophy and religion, such as Sufism, Bahai'ism and Islamic denominations without however the pregnancy of meaning and the esteem it has had in Hindu society. The excessive commercialization of modern times has tainted the lofty ideals, especially where *gurus* have permitted the essence of their message and teachings to be adulterated or have made concessions.

By contrast and in view of more revolutionary theories and discoveries in Science, could the philosophy and rationale at the back of the primary and original concern of genuine *gurus* come again to the fore, as Swami Ranganathananda⁷ among others has so brilliantly prognosticated?

6. *Kaṭha Upanishad* 2, 5; *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* 1, 2, 8; *Maitri Upanishad*, 7, 9; Cf. Mathew 23, 24.

7. Cf. his lectures and publications in the field of "Science and Religion."