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SPIRITUAL MASTER IN THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE IN INDIAN TRADITION

While there have been slow but continuous changes in the practices and beliefs of Hinduism as a religion, the essential spiritual teachings of Hinduism have remained largely unaltered. The spiritual teachings however, concerning the path of knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*) survive as the most distinctive features of this spirituality.

This paper does not deal with the "spiritual journeys" of masses of modern Hindus—popping in to take *darśan* (auspicious sight) of holy persons while on pilgrimage (*yātrā*), visiting holy temples, holy places, bathing in holy rivers, etc. with a hope to attain religious experience.¹ Rather, an attempt is being made here to elucidate the initial stages of the journey of those seekers (*sādhakas*) who have made permanent commitments by becoming disciples (*śiṣhyas*) under the guidance of a particular guru.

Contemporary Hindu spiritual writings are replete with exhortations that seekers should indefatigably strive to perfect themselves while patiently waiting for God (*Īśvara*) to bring them in contact with a guru. In other words, God knows when one is qualified for the journey and longing for the goal, and so the Lord makes it possible for one to meet a spiritual preceptor who can guide one on the path which may seem to be bathed in darkness. As Swami Sivananda explains: "For a sincere *sādhaka*, help comes in a mysterious manner. When the time is ripe, the guru and the disciple are brought together

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1. For these aspects of Modern Hinduism see :
Madan, T. M., *The Quest for Hinduism* *International Social Science Journal*, 1977, 29, 261-278.
Babb, L.A. Glancing; *Visual Interaction in Hinduism*.
Journal of Anthropological Research, 1981, 387-401.
Eck, D.L. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*.
Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1981.

by the Lord in a mysterious manner.”² Swami Sivananda’s disciples, Swamis Chidananda³ and Vishnudevananda,⁴ echo their master’s emphasis that one should not be idle but should practice *sādhana* (spiritual discipline) that one learns from books and/or from advanced students until “the proper time comes” and one meets the guru.

There is an interesting paradox in Hindu spirituality. Intellectually, Hinduism accepts many possible paths to liberation and admonishes seekers to be respectfully tolerant of those following different ways, but practically when one “chooses” a path one must be committed to it *as if* it is the only way. There is no place for dilettantes who flit like “spiritual butterflies” from path to path, from guru to guru. One should stick to *one* path and *one* guru. A guru should command the exclusive allegiance of his disciples. As Swami Muktananda remarked, “You should remember that life is short. If you wander meeting different holy men, you should do this only briefly and then settle one guru.”⁵ In his classic clear and simple style, Swami Sivananda makes the same point by drawing an analogy to a well:

Do not dig here and there shallow pits for getting water. The pits will dry up soon. Dig a very deep pit in one place . . . Even so, try to imbibe thoroughly the spiritual teachings of one preceptor alone. Drink deep from one man . . . Stick to one Guru and follow his instructions.⁶

Elitism

The type of Hindu spirituality being discussed here remains essentially elitist. It is part of Hinduism’s Great Tradition—higher teachings for the reflective few—rather than the Little Tradition of rituals

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2. Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*. Shivanandanagar, Tehri-Garhwal, UP, India: Divine Life Society, 1974, p. 207. (hereafter books by this publisher will be listed : DLS).
 3. Chidananda, The Necessity for a Guru. *The Divine Life*, 1980, 42, 100-103.
 4. Vishnudevananda, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*. New York : Pocket Books, 1972, p. 277.
 5. Muktananda, personal conversation; Ganeshpuri, India; December, 1973.
 6. Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*. DLS, 1974, p. 208.

and devotion for the unreflective masses.⁷ *Jñāna-yoga* and *rāja-yoga* may be called introverted forms of spirituality (systems of *enstasis*) in contrast to the more popular *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga* which are more extroverted (systems of *ecstasis*).

Upper caste Hindus (especially Brahmins) dominate the Great Tradition. While democratic, modernizing India has been emphasizing the lofty ideal of secular education for all, spiritual education has remained essentially aristocratic—education by and for the best people. The rationale behind the view that the “best” are high caste people is that one is born into a high caste and therefore has the qualities of being an excellent disciple (*śishya*) because of what one has done in one’s previous life. Thus, the dogma of *karma*-rebirth is resorted to so that low caste people and/or women of any caste may be excluded from higher spiritual teachings. The “easier” forms of religious expression (i.e., through work and devotion) are open to them. Ideally, caste, sex, race, etc. should not be barriers, and many liberal spiritual guides today do not consider these to be important factors. This by no means implies that these gurus accept everyone, but that they carefully choose disciples on other grounds. The chosen few are qualified people (*adhikāris*).

Certain prerequisites are necessary if one is to pursue the path of Knowledge.⁸ One must have reached a certain level of understanding. To illustrate an analogy: guru is like a university professor ready (to condescend) to teach the higher knowledge (of Calculus or Physics) to those who are qualified (having the basics of mathematics and science), but is not prepared to waste time and effort attempting to convey this wisdom to those who will not only not understand (like elementary school children), but who will also probably distort or dilute the teaching.

7. See McMichael, J. D., Will Hinduism survive? *The Divine Life*, 1979, 41, 83-88 and 116-122.

8. Śaṅkara stressed (a) *viveka*-discrimination between the Real and the not-real, (b) *vairāgya* - disregard for enjoyment now or after death, (c) *śat-sampatti* - possession of six perfections: calmness, control of senses, self-settledness, fortitude in enduring opposites like heat and cold or pleasure and pain, concentration of mind, and faith in the teaching of Vedānta, and (d) *mumukṣutvam* - longing for liberation. See *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 19-27, *Aparokṣānubhāti* 3-9, etc.

Anyone who has ever taught knows that despite one's most zealous efforts, very few students will really gain something substantial. Gurus seem to conclude that since this is the case, one should not endeavour to share spiritual wisdom with the unqualified. As Sri Ramakrishna said, "It is necessary to choose fit vessels as the receptacles for spiritual truths."⁹

Swami Krishnananda has an amusing classification of would-be disciples according to their ability to comprehend spiritual teaching and the time required to "catch it." The best type of disciples are like gunpowder or gasoline—they catch fire immediately. Second class disciples are like firewood or charcoal—they will catch fire if one takes the trouble by tending them carefully for some time. Third class are like watery banana stems—no matter what efforts one takes, these people still will not "catch" the fire of spiritual teaching.¹⁰ If a guru is quite an elitist he will accept only the best type of disciples. Swami Krishnananda, however, implies that he is willing to struggle to ignite second class disciples as well. The third type cannot truly be called disciples; at best, they are followers or devotees. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of people are in the third category.

While the dissemination of spiritual knowledge through books has made some twentieth century gurus well-known, the true guru, whether famous or relatively unknown, can only lead a handful of disciples (*śishyas*) on the spiritual journey. It is ludicrous to find celebrity gurus exaggerating the number of their followers. The aim is quality not quantity. Can a "disciple" who is one among thousands have any meaningful relationship with his guru? This may be hero worship like being a fan of a movie star or emulating an athlete or politician, but the intimacy (in guidance) necessary for spiritual progress will be lacking.¹¹ Therefore, the sincere guru will concentrate on a few

9. *Condensed Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1978 (6th edition), p. 195.

10. *Swami Krishnananda in Conversation*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983, p. 168. (see also: Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*, p. 136).

11. Respect, even reverence, for a guru is expected, but this should not lead to second-degree egoism: praising one's own guru and finding faults with other gurus. This is egoism because one thinks that simply because of association with such a famous, highly-evolved guru one has made great progress on the spiritual ladder. A great guru may help but only if one practises *sādhana*.

disciples rather than try to persuade many people (banana stems) to follow him.

In addition to understanding, a certain attitude is necessary. A teacher gives his best when he realizes that a student is in tune with him. Right attitude, which includes humility and openness, helps the disciple come in tune with the guru. Moreover, the guru leads the aspirant gradually on the spiritual path, knowing that if the disciple rushes he may not remain tuned in.

Real teaching (and real progress on the spiritual path) can occur only when the disciple has disciplined himself so that he is tuned to the guru's wavelength; if not, the message will not come across clearly as when a radio is not properly tuned in to a station. As Swami Venkatesananda explains:

You know that you are not on the exact wavelength for a certain station when it starts crackling. If one is not on the guru's wavelength, the same thing happens within. The master says something and there is a crackling within, a strange form of inner resistance. . . a bit of alignment is needed . . . because if you're not on the same wavelength it is not possible for him to communicate with you.¹²

Finally, one must have a desire for liberation (*mokṣa*) so intense, that one would never want to be reborn again, even under the best circumstances. Unless the desire to reach the goal is compelling one will probably discontinue progress on the spiritual path.

Thus, qualified seekers (*adhikāris*) are an elite group, not because of their birth into a high caste, but because of past spiritual practice (*sādhana*).

The guru subjects the aspirant to an initial "entrance-exam" to determine whether the seeker is fit to be a disciple (*śiṣya*). The guru's wisdom includes the ability to discern who should receive spiritual teachings and when (i.e., the proper time so that the seed of knowledge

12. Venkatesananda, *Sivananda Yoga*. DLS, 1980, p. 53. (see also pp. 26-27 and Vishnudevananda, *Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, p. 275).

bears fruit).¹³ Therefore, the guru continues to test his disciple (*śishya*) to determine his level of understanding (i.e., how much progress he has made on the spiritual path). The guru leads the disciple step-by-step to Truth. To elaborate the analogy employed earlier: convinced that the university student has thoroughly comprehended Calculus and Physics, the professor proceeds to teach Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Inequality

Whereas the higher or final teaching of *jñāna-yoga* asserts the fundamental equality of all beings (as *ātman* non-different from *Brahman*), the lower or provisional teaching specifically states their inequality. When one examines what gurus have to say regarding their equality with or superiority to their disciples, one should keep these two levels of teaching in mind.

Indian social relations are based on hierarchy or inequality. One finds stability or harmony by identifying with the caste to which one belongs and dealing appropriately with others according to whether they are superior or inferior. When one turns away from society¹⁴ and begins a sincere spiritual quest he leaves his former identity behind. The disciple loses his old false identity and finds his true self by identifying with the spiritual master (guru) to whom he now "belongs." He seeks to efface his own identity in that of his master. He makes the most radical distinction between an inferior and a superior: I am an insignificant, unworthy creature and the guru is God. The adage of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.23), that one should have supreme

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13. While to be a disciple at all one must be up to certain level, a guru may have a few disciples who are at different levels - some may have progressed farther on the spiritual path than others. Thus, the guru's teaching to disciple A may not be applicable to disciple B. As Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*, p. 135 wrote: "The guru only knows the spiritual needs of his disciples. He will give the *upadeśa* according to the disciple's temperament and evolution. This *upadeśa* should be kept a secret . . . it is meant for you only".
 14. Spiritual life is a complete turn around from the life one has previously lived. In Christianity, it is *con-ventere*; in Hinduism, it is *parāvṛttiḥ* or *prayaścitta*. One seriously thinks about the spiritual life only after he has turned away from things that are valued in the secular life (usually, but not necessarily, after having experienced them). One turns away from the temporal and proceeds towards the Eternal.

devotion (*para-bhakti*) for one's spiritual teacher as one does for God, is still stressed today. As Sri Yogendra writes, "The position of a guru therefore is a distinguished one and assumes the importance and reverence due not only to a father but even to a god (*gurudeva*)."¹⁵ Swami Muktananda elaborates this same point:

A disciple should inculcate *guru-bhakti*, which means pure love for the Guru. One who honors and serves the Guru, with mind, body, and speech; who demands nothing in return; who is ever intent on obeying every command of the Guru in its entirety; who lives continuously in the thought of the Guru—such a one receives the blessings of the entire Godhead.¹⁶

Surrender

There is a strange irony in the slave-like behavior of the disciple who seeks freedom (*mokṣa*). The true guru realizes the necessity of surrender, but does not want the disciple to remain a slave to him (just as prior to becoming a disciple he was a slave to things of the world); authoritarianism in religion inhibits maturation, i.e., prevents spiritual progress. Rather, the guru hopes to lead the disciple on the journey from bondage (which involves suffering) to liberation (*mokṣa*). Starting the spiritual journey, one may find that there is a struggle within oneself due to one's strong ego (*ahamkāra*) which is unwilling to submit and admit that one needs help on this path. However, completely giving up body, mind, and worldly wealth to the guru will destroy one's ego and then real progress on the path is possible. This is the high price of freedom.

Recent Śāṅkarācāryas have stressed complete surrender to the guru to such an extent that they seem to imply that this alone is sufficient for one to receive God's grace and reach the goal.¹⁷ However,

15. Yogendra, *Facts about Yoga*. Santa Cruz, Bombay: The Yoga Institute, 1975, p. 146.

16. Swami Muktananda *Paramahansa*. Bombay: Vora and Co., 1969, p. 65.

17. *The Call of the Jagadguru* (Candraṣekharendra Sarasvati of Kāñcī). Madras: Ganesh, 1958, p. 32.

The Call of the Jagadguru (Candraṣekhara Bhāratī of Śṛṅgeri). Madras: Ganesh, 1961, p. 4.

This view, which reminds one of the "cat-theory" in Vaiṣṇavism, seems unexpected from Advaitins.

the more commonly-held position is that surrender is necessary but self-effort (*sādhana*) is equally important.

When modern pathfinders of *jñāna-yoga* write about worshipping the guru and/or humbly serving the guru—obeying his every instruction without any thought of reward—elements of *bhakti-yoga* and *karma-yoga* are being introduced (probably a strict distinction between the yogas is impossible to maintain). At any rate, surrender of the disciple (*śishya*) is beautifully expressed by Swami Venkatesananda:

I can go to the guru and say, 'I am your disciple, you are my guru', when I am prepared to do exactly what he tells me to do. . . . This surrender cannot be forced either by the guru or even by the disciple himself. It (simply) has to happen. . . . Until there is total and complete surrender on the part of the seeker, the Guru is not born. When there is this surrender something happens in the seeker who suddenly becomes a disciple (probably he has been disciplining himself all the way through) and the Guru is born.¹⁸

Surrender is not for the guru's benefit, but when the seeker humbles himself and submits he helps himself enormously. Not true guru will ever seek any gain from this submission or try to keep his disciple in bondage—as a subordinate. On the contrary, the true guru may treat the disciple as his equal (because he is leading the *śishya* to a realization of the essential equality of all as *ātman-Brahman*). The guru does not act like a tyrant, but rather treats the disciple like a free man (though the *śishya* lacks real freedom—*mokṣa*). Indeed, the guru will be extremely happy if his disciple reaches his level or even goes beyond him on the spiritual path. In any case, just as one might feel compelled to prostrate (do *pranām*) in front of a temple image or at the feet of a saint,¹⁹ a disciple feels compelled to adore and serve his guru. Swami Satyananda explains:

18. Venkatesananda, *Sivananda Yoga*. DLS, 1980 pp. 18, 58-60.

19. For a discussion of *pranām* see :

Brockington, J. L. *The Sacred Thread*. Edinburgh: The University Press, 1981, p. 199.

Babb, L.A. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 46.

And for a personal experience in the presence of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā: McMichael, J. Recognizing My Mother. *Ananda Vartā*, 1979, 26, 117-122.

A disciple is automatically drawn towards his guru like a bee towards a fragrant flower . . . He will be compelled to follow his guru . . . Other people may feel nothing for a particular guru, but his disciple will be overwhelmed in a way that is deeper than mere words can describe. The experience is ineffable.²⁰

It must be astonishing to a neophyte, who has finally completely surrendered and admitted his spiritual inferiority and need for help, when the person one venerates most in the world treats the disciple like his equal or friend (as Sri Ramakrishna did)²¹ or even turns the tables so completely that he is willing to serve the disciple (as Swami Sivananda did)²² The neophyte feels terribly unworthy and desperately seeks to make progress so that he becomes worthy of this honour.

Insulation

The spiritual tradition of *jñāna-yoga* today still stresses the practice of the disciple living with the guru. Many writers²³ insist that it is necessary in the early stages of the spiritual journey to live a life of relative seclusion under the guidance of a master, but one can move away later, when one can stand on one's own legs.

In modern secular education (in schools and colleges) one gains knowledge, but rarely is one's outlook on life profoundly changed. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the student is usually not involved in a meaningful personal relationship with the teacher. On the other hand, one's outlook radically changes when one studies under the guidance of the guru he lives with—one becomes an entirely different person. Swami Krishnananda discusses this point:

20. Satyananda, *Sannyasa Tantra*. Monghyr: Bihar School of Yoga, 1977, p. 78.

21. Rolland, R. *The Life of Ramakrishna*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974 (9th edition), p. 195. See also:

The Call of the Jagadguru (Śrīṅgeri), p. 9.

22. Venkatesananda, *Sivananda Yoga*. DLS, 1980, p. 16.

Sivananda obviously meant that he would serve the disciple in spiritual ways—by guiding him on the path (not mundane service).

23. Sivananda, *Guru and Disciple*. *The Divine Life*, 1980, 42, 284. Krishnananda, *Practical Hints on Sadhana*. *The Divine Life*, 1977, 39, 167.

Yogendra, *Facts about Yoga*, p. 153 compares the guru's initial care to a mother taking care of her baby for several years.

The *instruction* that the student receives from a teacher verbally is one thing. Perhaps the student can gain that instruction even from other sources, in schools and colleges. But the benefit of the *influence* of the teacher cannot be gained from other sources. When the guru speaks to the disciple, the soul of the guru makes an immediate impact on the mind of the disciple.²⁴

Ordinary teachers are primarily concerned with giving information orally, but spiritual teachers communicate Truth in any manner—not necessarily verbally. However, at first because the student is identified with the intellect, Swami Chinmayananda writes,

the teacher will have to explain in terms of the intellect that which is beyond the intellect. . . . (Finally) However much we may explain, the actual transference of knowledge from the teacher to the taught is not through words.²⁵

Dead or mediate book knowledge (as, for example, from the *Upaniṣads*) becomes alive or immediate when an exceptional, extraordinary human being, who practises what he teaches, communicates it.

Living with the guru, the disciple learns by observing the actions of the guru; the guru's very life is a living sermon. Being in the guru's company is inspiring. The book knowledge that he gives become significant because the guru also gives himself. True religion (spiritual wisdom) is not taught but caught from someone who has it.

The few disciples (*śiṣyas*) who live in the presence of the master may be elevated or transformed by the guru's word, by his personal example, by his glance, or by his touch.

Initiation

On the whole, spiritual initiation (*dīkṣā*) in its traditional form is preserved in contemporary *jñāna-yoga*. The living spiritual guide

24. Krishnananda, *The Role of the Guru in Vital Education*.

Swami Krishnananda Shashtyabdapurti Mahotsava Commemoration Volume. DLS, 1982, p. 53.

25. Chinmayananda, *Vedanta*. Madras: Chinmaya Publications, 1959, p. 202.

secretly whispers a particular sacred *mantra* into the disciple's ear (this may be called a spiritual gift), touches the disciple on the forehead—opening up the third eye, and gives some instructions for meditating using the *mantra*. The belief that one should not divulge the *mantra* to others, because it will lose its power if made public, is still held. Thus, at the very least, a secret bond is established between guru and disciple with regard to the carefully chosen sacred words which only the two of them know. However, it is possible that something much more-profound happens when one experiences initiation (*dīkṣā*). Swami Satyananda eloquently expresses it as follows:

Initiation is the start of a relationship where the mind of the disciple more and more flows with the mind of the guru. As the mind of the disciple gradually becomes more refined, so his mind and his guru's mind meet to form a common will. The guru progressively whittles away egoistical tendencies in the disciple and helps the disciple to find himself.²⁶

The disciple (*śiṣya*) who is initiated has dedicated himself (*dīkṣā* is from of the root *dīkṣ*—to dedicate oneself) to one special guru. From this guru he will receive guidance, power, and knowledge.

Swami Muktananda, who said that he received spiritual power (*śakti*) from his guru—Swami Nityananda, declares that this ultimate type of transformation (*dīkṣā*) may come about in various ways:

Shaktipat is a subtle spiritual process by which the guru transmits his divine power into the aspirant. The guru, as it were, enters into the very being of the disciple—it is like one lamp lighting another. The contact takes place in four different ways, namely, touch, word, look, or thought. This is initiation: it marks the beginning of spiritual awareness in the disciple.²⁷

The difference between the master and the *chela* (pupil or slave) is dissolved as a certain vibration of the guru is transferred to the mind of the disciple or the being of the guru enters the disciple and floods the disciple's entire being (because he has become empty—egoless). Thus the *śiṣya* is transformed into a truly spiritual being.

26. Satyananda, *Sannyasa Tantra*, p. 77.

27. Swami Muktananda *Paramahansa*, p. 58.

(see also: Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*, pp. 210-211).

Most modern exponents of the way of knowledge insist that a guru is absolutely essential²⁸ for the metamorphosis of the seeker to occur. Nevertheless, they emphasize that a guru can only aid one in becoming liberated, can only start the spiritual flame burning, can only help to remove obstacles on the path and guide one in the right direction. Finally, the disciple must make a concerted effort for perfection.

The guru is like a bridge between the realm of individuals who are seeking but are still in ignorance and the realm of the absolute,—the realm of wisdom, of freedom (*mokṣa*). Swami Sivananda expresses this point:

The guru is the *Mokṣa-dvara*. He is the gateway to the transcendental Truth-Consciousness. But, it is the aspirant who has to enter through it. The guru is a help, but the actual task of practical *sādhana* falls on the aspirant himself.²⁹

If someone is in the way the seeker cannot proceed. Thus, just as the disciple reduces himself to naught, so too the guru becomes no one. The more the disciple identifies with the guru, the more he finds the guru “disappearing”—becoming a deep absence through which the wayfarer on this spiritual journey must pass. Both individuals are “lost” in the Absolute Consciousness.

Conclusion

In trying to discuss the initial stages on the path of knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*), contemporary writers representing this path have often been forced to resort to analogies from common life such as digging a well, lighting gunpowder and firewood, tuning a radio, teaching a college class, passing through a doorway, etc. One may think that this is simplistic until one recalls how often classical Indian philosophers employed similar analogies. Yet these very analogies are a clear testimony that the path of *Jñāna yoga* is still very dynamic and very influential in the spiritual quest of contemporary India. *Jñāna* still attests to what is Unspeakable!

28. Jagadguru Śankarācārya Jayendra Sarasvatī of Kāñcī told me in Vārāṇasī in January, 1974 in a personal conversation: “The guru is absolutely necessary and you must follow the guru’s teaching faultlessly—then you will learn perfectly—as I learned perfectly from my guru.” (he said as he laughed loudly). Perhaps this reconciles the point made by the Jagadgurus above: if one truly surrenders to the guru one will reach the goal because one will do all the *sādhana* that the guru exhorts him to do.

29. Sivananda, *Bliss Divine*, p. 203.