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THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE (guru) AND THE DISCIPLE (śiṣya) IN INDIAN TRADITION

The term *guru* has nowadays become a household word in the West, and almost anybody who pretends to speak with authority is called a guru. It is also a much misunderstood and abused term. But let me make it clear that I am not speaking as a guru—rather I am speaking as a *śiṣya* or disciple, a seeker:

Before going any further, I would like to recite to you an invocation that a Hindu pupil chants out of love for his/her teacher :

*Oṃ saha nā vavatu, sahanōu bhunaktu,
saha vīryaṃ karavā vahai, tejasvi nāve-dhī-tam-astu
mā vidviṣa vahai ; Oṃ śānti śānti śāntiḥ !*

May he protect us both. May he nourish us both ;
May we discharge our work together with great strength ;
May our study be thorough and rewarding. May we
never quarrel with each other.

(*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II. iii. 19)

The path of discipleship is a long and arduous path ; only a few succeed in treading it diligently all the way. The path is compared to the sharp edge of a razor ; and the guru to the sword that cuts and reshapes the disciple's life. I must confess that I have not fully mastered the art of discipleship, and am therefore not really qualified to speak about gurus. However in my search I have met a few gurus, two of whom have had the greatest influence in my life, and from whom I have learnt many things about the guru-disciple relationship. My first lesson was that, paradoxically, a guru is first and foremost a perfect disciple.

It is important then to begin with this point of view and ask what it takes to be a disciple, because — particularly in the West — this point

* An earlier version of this paper under a different title was presented as a radio talk to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC).

is almost always overlooked. People go looking for a guru in the same way that they go looking for a good-quality car ; some people make judgements about gurus without fully comprehending the meaning of guruship, and without reflecting on their own qualifications to make such judgments. When people ask me to tell them who is a good guru, I ask them whether they would recognise one if a guru came their way. If one falters on the path of discipleship then one is quick to blame the guru. To be a good disciple is as much a mystery as is the art of being a guru. One learns the hard way. In spiritual matters there is no easy way. Western—rather modern—seekers are inclined to seek instant enlightenment, and so they look for instant enlighteners, instant gurus. Soon, however, one finds that the words and acts of a guru are often incomprehensible to the ears and eyes of the untrained ; the less one is prepared the more frustrating it is, as the point and purpose of the guru's oblique behaviour appear elusive—until perhaps much later. For example, the best amongst gurus teach in silence. Ramana Maharshi taught his disciples mostly through silence, while Meher Baba, the Sufi mystic, kept a vow of silence for forty years ; and yet both were excellent teachers in that they conveyed perfectly the essence of their teachings.

Now, the disciple, before being qualified to take instructions from a teacher has to fulfil some basic preliminaries—which amount to more than what one requires to do yoga. Yoga — the spiritual yoga and not the much-talked-about physical yoga — provides necessary guidelines to help one embark on a spiritual path, but thereafter the seeker has to internalize a whole array of teaching and disciplines before approaching a guru.¹ A good guru will know when a pupil is ready and at what level, and when one is not.

Śaṅkarāchārya, the monumental guru from the 8th century A.D., summarized the guidelines for a would-be disciple. He stipulated² : “The man who discriminates between the real and the unreal, whose mind is turned away from the unreal, the false ; who possesses calmness and allied virtues, and who is longing for liberation, is alone considered qualified to inquire after God (Truth).” Some of the important requirements are faith, devotion, concentration, gratitude and stillness of mind.

1. *Katha Upaniṣad*. Invocation Ch. 1.

2. *Vivekacudamanai of Sri Shankaracharya*, Swami Madhavananda (tr.), *Advaita Ashrama*, Calcutta, 1970, pp. 5-25.

Above all one must be earnest and totally sincere in one's search. The seeker should be aware of the futility of the ordinary life and aim for ultimate liberation and truth in God.

He must have strong will power to persist in his chosen path and with his guru, in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Approached in this humble way, the guru receives the aspirant and tests his inner qualities to determine his readiness for higher spiritual growth and development. Once that is settled he plans the nature of the discipline and proceeds to instruct his pupil. This may involve injunctions to study, observe rites and prohibitions, follow a life of righteous action, thought and word. At this point the transmission of the secret power takes place. This is an initiation or DIKṢA which facilitates union with the Divine. Initiation may occur through a touch, a gaze, or a rite by the exchange of a word or *mantra* (a repetitive chant) or even through thoughts and dreams. It is believed that during the initiation the consciousness of the guru enters the consciousness of the disciple thereby opening a path to shared Divinity. To use the symbolism of the Vedās, the guru keeps the disciple in his womb for 3 days and then delivers his 'baby' whereupon the very gods hasten to greet the newcomer.

So now it can be seen that contracting a relationship with a guru is not something like boarding a plane and roaming the streets of Poona or Bombay or Kathmandu, looking for someone who will provide instant enlightenment. Nor is it simply a matter of paying X sum of dollars to an organisation or guru that promises instant enlightenment. An ideal teacher is an ideal student, and cannot be compromising in this respect for he/she must experience the pain and travail of learning. It is not the teacher who has to learn at this stage ; it is the pupil who has to learn ; and even for learning simple things like the alphabet we all have to rely on a teacher. We all rely on the guidance of experts and those more knowledgeable in various disciplines related to our lives such as in politics, economics, the physical sciences, etc. Is it not all the more necessary for us to rely on experts in the realm of the spiritual ? Ultimately, however, it all depends on the seeker : it is the seeker's responsibility to learn, to apply what the teacher imparts, and to carry on the search to the ultimate end. The guru helps clear the obstacles and shows the way.

There is the other side of the story too, where people are highly sceptical about the whole business of gurus. This scepticism, or rather cynicism, goes hand in hand with the current repudiation of authority,

the attitude that 'I am fine', 'I need no one to tell me how to go about my life'. Certainly, the world has had any number of bad experiences with despotic authority and power-hungry leaders. Some so-called gurus have also betrayed their loyalty to the tradition in their search for power, fame and wealth. But tradition soon exposes these deceptive 'gurus', judges them and discards them. 'By their deeds we shall know them', it is said, and history and posterity invariably judge them. This anti-guru sentiment is a modern phenomenon; there is however increasingly greater interest in the wisdom and authority of the ancient traditions and in the words of the more enlightened amongst teachers and masters, whether of the East or the West.

The guru is recognized as a skilful medium that is required for one to realize one's potentialities, and this cannot be achieved without some guidance and wisdom. Yet there are some who seem to be opposed to the guru-śiṣya tradition and would have us believe that a goal as lofty as spiritual freedom and union with God, can be attained without the help of a guru or master. Such advocates of a no-guru following, however, inadvertently set themselves up as gurus, write thousands of books on enlightenment, give lectures—and sometimes themselves take lessons from other teachers.

If it is claimed that no guru is required after a certain stage of spiritual development, when the disciple is ready to carry the burden of his search wholly on his own shoulders, as it were, then it may be granted that the need for a guru ceases. But to suggest that—as in the case of curriculum education—the tutorship of one who knows and is skilled is not required is quite preposterous. In Buddhism, no less than in any other spiritual tradition, the guru-disciple relationship has commanded great respect.

In India the tradition of *guru-śiṣya* goes back several centuries and is still preserved. It goes back to the times when the sacred or 'revealed' knowledge, known as the *Vedās*, had to be preserved and passed on. This was done orally for many centuries, and so the whole extent of the ancient teachings had to be committed to memory and lived in practice. The historian Winternitz³ narrates: 'Whoever wished to become acquainted with a text had to go to a teacher in order to hear it from him. Therefore we repeatedly read in the older literature that a warrior or a brahman (brahmin), who wished to acquire a

3. M. Winternitz., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, N.Y. (Russell and Russell, 1971), p. 36,

certain knowledge, travels to a famous teacher, and undertakes unspeakable troubles and sacrifice in order to participate in the teaching, which cannot be attained in any other manner. Therefore to a teacher, as the bearer and preserver of the sacred knowledge, the highest veneration is due, according to ancient Indian law—as the spiritual father he is venerated, now as an equal, now as a superior, of the physical father ; he is looked upon as an image of god Brahman, and to him who serves the teacher faithfully and humbly, Brahman's heaven is assured.' Truly, as one of the Upaniṣads, a sacred Vedic text, declares, 'A mān who has got a teacher knows—he just has to wait until he is freed.' In the *Bhagavadgītā*—a classic example of the essence of the guru-disciple relationship, Kṛiṣṇa, the guru assures Arjuna, the ideal pupil that the wise are always there to instruct one who truly seeks.⁴

In the West too, the respect of the pupil for the teacher has not been lacking. An ideal parallel to the *Bhagavadgītā* is to be found in the dialogues of Socrates, which Plato has left for us. Plato understood, it seems, the importance of a teacher of wisdom. He called such a teacher a 'midwife'⁵—for he is one who helps to bring out the wealth of wisdom and knowledge which lies dormant in the individual seeker. Before Plato, Pythagoras founded an esoteric circle of which he was the master. Jesus Christ too was an excellent teacher. John's baptising of Jesus has been seen by Eastern teachers, such as Paramahansa Yogananda, as the affirmation of this respect. Jesus himself gathered numerous disciples who were totally dedicated to him and who carried his message to distant shores and times.

I would like to add a little more about the qualities of a guru. Though I have used the pronominal 'he', this does not mean that there is no 'she' or women gurus, or that there cannot be. One of my own teachers is a *holy woman*—a Mother indeed. Indeed, in the Hindu tradition at least, women enjoy as much, if not more respect than men, as gurus.⁶ In fact, women are often considered to have an advantage over men, since, being capable of motherhood, women find it easier to be compassionate, considerate, forgiving and much more loving than men. A male guru has to cultivate these 'motherly' qualities and to connect himself with the feminine aspect of divinity in the

4. *The Bhagavadgītā* ; Chapter IV. 34. Radhakrishnan or R. C. Zaehner, (translation), Oxford University Press, 1973.

5. Vide *Theatetus* and *Phaedo*, Dialogues of Plato.

6. See *Women Saints of East and West*, Ramakrishna Publications, 1978.

purity of a mother-child relationship. And he has to show the same motherliness towards his pupils.

A guru who offers instruction in the field of spirituality has to be of compelling excellence ; the listener too has to be alert, responsive and enthusiastic ; only then the result will follow.

Gurus are by no means readymade. Tradition has it that a guru goes through years of austerity and fervent discipline—*tapas*—in apprenticeship under another guru. Some chosen few are born gurus —but this is accounted for by their practices and training in previous lives, unless the guru is a divine embodiment — which the tradition also allows for — in which case the guru would be identified as an Avatāra, or man-God. Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa are said to have been ‘incarnations’ of God Viṣṇu,⁷ the primordial guru. However, gurus who emerge from purely human origins have to transcend their humanity, for which asceticism, yoga, meditation and a devout, silent life of sexual continence are part of the discipline. These austerities are very much a part of their lives and a means to rise above the desires and pre-occupations of the mind and the senses or lower self in man. But today, unfortunately, we have so-called gurus who have practised little in the way of austerities; some indeed wish to do away with austerities and discipline altogether. Some have bought an easy passage to guruhood by luring credulous and often confused young minds, and by exploiting their unripe spiritual sensibility and emotions.⁸

7. See *Hindu Myths* by Wendy O’Flaherty (Penguin paperback), 1975.

“The exact number of ‘embodiments’ (*avatarās*) has varied in different Hindu texts. However there are ten important and commonly accepted embodiments : Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (man-lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parasu-Rāma (Rāma-with-an-axe), Rāma (perfect man), Kṛiṣṇa, Buddha, Kālkin (a messianic figure).

“When Arjuna learns that Krishna is an embodiment of Vishnu, he is overwhelmed and filled with intense admiration for Krishna.” (See) Chapters IX–XII (on this), ... from *Religious Experience* (Weeks 6–10, Study Guide commentary on the *Bhagavadgita*), Deakin University (Victoria), 1979, p. 42

8. Suspect amongst these self-proclaimed ‘Masters’ are : Rejneesh in Poona, whose Reichian influence has caused considerable controversy in the spiritual debate in India. The teenager Guru Maharaji, and the late leader of the Hare Krishna Consciousness Movement, Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, have also gone about their own ways in dealing with the youthful frustrations and confusion rampant in the highly technologized West. For an account of a more authentic approach, see Dr. Samuel Sandweiss, *Holy Man and the Psychiatrist*, Birthday Publications, N.Y., 1978,

The guru's instruction or 'touch'⁹ has also nowadays become a commodity marketable through newspapers and other such media—very much in the manner in which supermarkets sell manufactured products in return for money. The modern 'transcendental' mediums do not teach out of love as the traditional teachers did. Money, in my view, can degrade the whole guru-disciple relationship unless it is regulated in a judicious manner on a non-commercial basis. In the East the system operates fairly efficiently through voluntary donations or alms offered according to one's will and capability. In the West situation is somewhat bizarre. At first one is told that one can make whatever donation one wishes, then one is told that the meagre sum offered cannot fulfil the purpose of the mission. One then begins to run, but alas one is not left free to do so. In some cases donations amount to a week or two's pay packet. God bless one who falls a prey to this donation extracting game.

In the traditional East, the general understanding has been that a disciple pays back his teacher in terms of love and service,¹⁰ and that if the guru charges money then that undermines the worth of the instruction. In modern times — especially in the West — however, the approach has been somewhat modified, for while it is easy for a teacher to seek alms on the streets in the East, in the West such practices are not looked upon kindly. The cost of setting up centres and retreats for instruction is also considerable, especially in the West. These, it would have to be conceded, are practical realities that any guru whether from the East or the West has to face and reckon with. But the crux lies in the manner in which the guru comes to terms with the challenging situation in modern times.

Thus, if a guru charges too much money then one ought to have second thoughts about approaching the guru. A true guru teaches one how to grow in *love*, not increase in wealth. A guru should be rich in heart, not in material possessions; simplicity is the highest virtue

9. No offence is meant to the guru and spiritual hero of the B.B.C. Television production "THE GURU'S TOUCH". Indeed, the guru in question, Swami Baba Muktananda, stands high in the esteem of the writer. But the writer questions the claim by the devotees of the Baba that in the absence of the Baba, the devotees — or some amongst them — have the right and power to confer the 'touch' to other seekers.

A few traditional teachers in India continue this approach. Thus, Sri Sathya Sai Baba runs free colleges for boys and girls, which are affiliated to universities, enabling the pupils to receive teachings in both secular and spiritual concerns. Indeed, a *toṭa* sense of education must incorporate both,

a guru can teach his disciples — only if he knows it himself. And simplicity, therefore, is one of the hallmarks of a genuine guru.

Now what does a guru teach and how is it most effective for the disciple? The guru does not instruct his disciple about just anything — far less does he concern himself with mundane and trivial details. His function is to impart knowledge and wisdom about things of the highest order and concern, *i.e.*, the transcendental aspects of man's existence. Most of what an Indian guru teaches emanates from the ancient scriptures mentioned earlier — the *Vedās*. The *Vedās* are the living words whose meanings the guru has realized in his life and which have become a reality to him. These words are not just any words of ancient origin : they are words packed with wisdom ; collectively they are called *śruti* — what has been 'heard' and is therefore sacred. *Śruti* appears to have a parallel in the *logos* of Judaeo-Christian scriptures. But one has to have a considerable degree of awareness before one hears the true words from a guru, and this has to increase even more before one realizes the truth of these words. The word of a guru no doubt is the link between the active life and the life to come, based on inner understanding of the mysterious process of life and spirit. The latter, however, is disclosed by the words of the guru, but only if one knows how to *listen* to the deeper significance of the words. As the *Bhagavadgītā* points out : a few hear of this ancient secret, fewer understand it, and fewer still realise it as a goal for themselves. An enlightened guru is the embodiment of the living word, it is said, as he has realized and internalized its meaning within the depths of his being ; and as he holds the power accompanying the word, he is the perfect mediator between the disciple and the ultimate. Thus gurus are sometimes called Godmen. In all sincerity, it may be said, a guru is a child to a child, a man to a man and a woman to a woman — he is at once a teacher and best friend combined.

One last point that is often stressed by the tradition is that it is not always the case that a seeker finds the guru he or she may be desperately looking for. It is often the case that the guru finds the disciple, much to the disciple's astonishment. 'When you are ready the guru comes to you' Ramana Maharshi has said. A guru knows when a seeker is ready for the path. And, of course, one's own guru may not be the one suited for another, in other words, different seekers need different gurus according to their spiritual level and temperament. Not every guru is qualified to take on disciples at very high stages of their spiritual development. In some cases a guru will send a seeker or his own disciple to another guru as the need arises. There is no

room for bigotry and competition in the tradition. But, on the other hand, it is extremely unwise and dangerous for a seeker or pupil to jump from one guru to another without counsel—as people often do with supermarkets and car-dealers. The guru is a sacred institution and is not to be taken lightly. Nor should one follow a particular guru merely because that guru has become the fashion with a large following. One should sort out his motives first and be absolutely certain that (a) one is prepared for a guru, (b) that a particular guru is suitable for him.

And, finally, the tradition teaches that if one finds one's efforts to look for a guru hopeless and fruitless, one need only surrender oneself to God, and make the resolution to have God as one's master, for, as Sri Ramakrishna put it, it is GOD who is ultimately the Mother, Father and GURU *par excellence*.