

THE INDIAN GURU-SISHYA TRADITION: A MODEL FOR TOMORROW

Paul Palatty*

The master-disciple relationship is a phenomenon common to all religions and their mystical traditions. It can be regarded as the most universal and the most particular dyad¹. A closer look may reveal that the figure of the Master and that of the disciple are interdependent and inseparable archetypes². "A disciple is born when a true master is found, it is in turn the surrender of the disciple which makes the master³." In any ultimate religious experience, a radical self-surrender is seen as the indispensable condition⁴. The Master enables the disciple to express the surrender and the disciple becomes conscious of the surrender to a master. This is the core of the master-discipleship relationship.

In the ancient educational system of India, the teacher (*guru*) received the pupils (*chela* or *sishya*) in his own ashram or hermitage, where formation is given to them. The *chela* was to be very obedient to the *guru*, to work in the household of the *guru* and pay great reverence to him⁵. This reverence is to be paid to the *guru* as a spiritual parent. The

*Dr. Paul Palatty did his doctoral studies at St. Peter's Institute of Theology, Bangalore.

¹For an analysis of the Master-Disciple relationship in Hinduism and Christianity, Cf. C. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism, Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation?*, Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991, 7-30. For a study of the various religious experiences in different religious tradition, Cf. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Longmans and Green, 1952.

²Cf. C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

³Cornille, *The Guru*, 29.

⁴In monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the spiritual way is a way of asceticism and self-mortification: Cf. Cornille, *The Guru*, 11. Cf. Also, E. Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, London: J.M. Dent, 1913, 112; A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chaphill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, 362; For the Spiritual masters role of guiding the disciple, see: L. Bouyer, *Mysterion: Du mystere als mystique*, Paris: O.E.I.L., 1986.

⁵B. Walker, "Guru", in *Hindu World*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharila Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983, 419. It is *Chand. Up.* 8.15.1. that the term *guru* is seen as designation for a religious teacher. The *guru* is the centre of

pupil was prohibited to marry the daughter of the *guru*, as she becomes a sister in relationship with him as soon as he enters to the *guru-chela* relation. This amounts to a father-son relationship concerning his status with the *guru*. As the *guru* is regarded as a representative and the mediator of the divine powers; the disciples are subjected to him as if to God with an implicit obedience.⁶

1. The Adiguru and Guru

According to the ancient religious tradition, God is believed to be the founder of the particular order or religious sect and he is called the *adiguru*, the 'first *guru*' of the order. The existing *guru* is regarded as the embodiment of the founder-God and he is the last in the succession starting from the founder-God. As he is the successor of God himself, the deity incarnate, the salvation or *moksha* can be attained only through him⁷. When a *guru* dies, one of the disciples, initiated and selected by him, becomes the *guru*.⁸

The present *guru*, the successor-incarnate of the deity, is sometimes actually worshipped⁹. The devotees wave lights before him; burn incense in his presence; sing devotional songs and hymns and prostrate before him. Another form of showing devotion to the *guru* is *charana-puja*, 'foot-

sacredness in the Hindu tradition. Cf. D. Miller, "The *guru* as the Centre of Sacredness", SR, 6/5. 1976-77, 527-533. The orthodoxy of tradition is seen in the valid tradition of *gurus*: X. Irudayaraj. "The *Guru* in Hinduism and Christianity", *Vidyajyothi* 34, 1975; Cf. Also, L. Renou, *Hinduism*, New York: Washington square, 1963; S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1922.

⁶J. Garrett, "Guru", *Classical Dictionary of India*, Jodhpur: Scientific Publishers, 1986, 236.

⁷*Mandu.Up.* 1.2.12 says "Nothing that is eternal (not made) can be gained by what is not eternal (made)".

⁸Walker, *Guru*, 419. The word *guru* comes from 'gu', which means 'darkness' and 'ru' means 'dispeller' (Cf. *Avidya taraka Up.* 14-18). But some others think, that the literal meaning is 'weighty one' as the spiritual quality of the *guru*, is expressed in the measure of quantity. Cf. Heimann, *Facets*, 118.

⁹X. Irudayaraj, *The Guru*, 338; The *guru* is to be seen as a God: "Let the teacher be unto thee like a God": *Taitti.Up.* 1.11.2; "To a high-minded man who feels the highest devotion for God, and his *guru* as God.." *Sveta. Up.* 6.23.

worship', by offering flowers and money at the feet of the *guru*. In certain instances, some kind of curious forms of reverence are said to be shown to the *guru*. The followers drink the water, by which the feet of the *guru* are washed; swallow the rest of the food materials such as fruit, betel, etc. chewed by the *guru*.¹⁰

The *guru* belongs to a class of priests, very clearly distinguished from the *purohitha*, who is a kind of domestic chaplain and usually married. The *guru* generally lives in celibacy, though some are married. Each cast or sect of the religious cult has its particular *guru*, belonging to the class of Brahmin or *Sudra*¹¹. He is usually in charge of the cult, responsible for the observance of the traditions and rules of the community.¹²

When the people come to the presence of the *guru*, they venerate him with an action of *sashtanga*, i.e., 'prostration of the eight members'. The *guru*, in turn gives the *asirvada*, i.e., benediction, which can give, according to their belief, remission of sins¹³. The *guru's* words, actions and even a look are considered powerful and efficacious. The *prasada*, or the present that the *guru* gives to the disciples, such as a little cow-dung ashes to smear on the forehead, flowers offered to idols, pieces from his meals, water in which he has washed his hands or feet, etc. are received by the disciples with reverence and belief of purifying the body and the soul. As the benediction of the *guru* is efficacious, his curse also is efficacious and powerful and believed to take its effect whether it is done justly or otherwise¹⁴.

Generally, the *gurus* reside in some sort of monasteries or closed hermitages called *mathas*. The residence of the principal *guru* is known as

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 419-20.

¹¹Garret, *Guru*, 236.

¹²The laws of Manu are venerable laws of Hinduism and they regard the *guru* as Brahman: Cf. *Laws of Manu*, 2.226. Manu speaks of two types of teachers. 1. The *Upadhyaya*, who teaches only a part of the Vedas, for getting remuneration. 2. The *Acharya*, who is authorised to invest the student with the sacred thread, teaches the Vedas, *sastras* and the Upanishads without accepting money: 2.140-141.

¹³*Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 237.

simhasana, the throne and of the inferior, one is called *pitha*, seat¹⁵. The great *gurus* do not appear in public very often. Whenever, they do, it will be with big solemnity and splendour, seated at the back of an elephant, or in a rich palanquin. Some will have a guard of horse, with troops and arms, accompanied by great musicians and instruments, singers of his praises and odes. Incense and perfumes are burned; new clothes are spread before him on the road. Dancing girl and children accompany him. During this visit, fines and tribute are collected as *pada-kanika*, i.e. feet offerings. Sometimes the devotees are threatened with a curse, if they fail to pay the fines or the tributes, as they believe that the dishonouring of the *guru* is dreadful of the evil effects.¹⁶

In the Sikh religious tradition, the *guru* enjoys a much more elevated position.¹⁷ In the history, they had ten successors as continuous heads of Sikhism. The tenth *guru* declared himself as the last one. Then onwards the Sikh Holy Book, the *Granth*, was declared as the *Guru*. The Sikh venerates the '*Guru Granth*' with divine honour.

2. The Need of a *Guru*

The traditional belief is so particular to advocate that certain divine and important truths cannot be attained by ordinary learning of books or by independent, personal and intellectual reflection. They can be handed down only by gifted and inspired leaders¹⁸. Such esoteric divine truths of the cult can be transmitted only by persons who had been appointed by the deity to receive them in the first instance.

The *guru* is the only living flame of such truth and he only can charge the unlit wick of the disciple duly dipped in the oil of cult teaching with the divine light. The secrets of the cult is 'stored' in the *guru*, and the mere formality of teaching these truths or uttering the

¹⁵Garret, *guru*, 237.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁷Walker, *Guru*, 420.

¹⁸The Upanishads speak of the indispensability of *guru*. Cf. *Mandu.Up.*, 1.2.12; *Taitti.Up.*, 1.11.2; *Svet. Up.*, 6.23.

words of a mantra will not convey enlightenment, unless done so by a *guru*. Practical initiation is thus impossible without a *guru*.¹⁹

In the cult practice and in the learning process, selection of proper *guru* is inevitable. Learning of meditative techniques, different *asanas*, sitting postures in meditation and contemplation, ancient Vedic and Upanisadic knowledge, etc. can be attained by the help of an experienced guidance of a *guru*.

3. The Initiation Rite (*Diksha*) of the Pupils

In the Vedas, the religious student is called *brahmacharin*, meaning 'one who walks in Brahman', the supreme God. In the Vedic society, the practice of religious studentship was developed and strictly regulated by rules.²⁰ The initiation to the religious education is called *diksha*, which is a religious rite to raise one from the 'profane to the sacred' level, sanctifying him for a special task. It opens the disciple to the special grace of God. The main duty of the *guru* is to impart the *diksha*. "...for a *guru* is one who has received *diksha* from one or more *gurus*, is capable of conferring and has actually conferred *diksha* on another person or persons. All other

¹⁹Walker, *Guru*, 419.

²⁰R.V. X, 109 5; A.V. IV, 108,2; 133,3 The *Atharva Veda* (xi 5) gives characteristic features of the religious studentship. The pupil is initiated by the teacher in the a new life. He wears a antelope skin, and make his hair grow long (*Atharva Veda*, xi.5.6). He collects fuel for his master (A.V. xi.5, 4.6). he goes for begging for livelihood (A.V. xi.5, 9), learns and practices penance. The student lives in the house of the teacher (*acaryakula-vasin*) (Cf. *Chad.Up.* ii.23, 2; *Brah. Up.* Vi.3, 15; *Taitt. Up.*, i. 3,3; 11,2). He has to look after the sacrificial fires (*Chad. Up.* Iv.3,5) and tends the house (*Sathpatha Brahmana*, iii, 6,2,18). A *mantra* in the *Asvatayana Grhya Sutra*, i.22, 1.2., sums up the duties of the pupil as "thou art a *Brahmacharin*; eat water: perform thy duty; sleep not in the daytime; be obedient to thy teacher, study the Veda." A special duty that is said was to guard the cattle; to bring the dried dung from the field for fuel and any available sticks. (Cf. *Aitayeya Arannayaka*, iii, 1,6; *Chand. Up.* Iv.5,5). Chastity was to be kept by the pupil probably due to the possibility of misconduct between a student and the wife of his preceptor. For the above information. Cf. Arthur Anthony Macdonnell and Arthur Berniedale Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, vol.II, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, 74-76.

qualification ... spiritual maturity, age, renown, learning, etc. are marginal to guruhood.²¹

Originally, the rite was for the solemn preparation of the *yajamana* (the sacrificer) for the Soma sacrifice and this *diksha* was personified as the wife of Soma. Later, the term popularly was used to denote the rite of initiation of a person into the mysteries of an esoteric order by his *guru*²². The knowledge is imparted in degrees depending on the spiritual growth of the disciple and he is asked to profess an oath that he will be keeping the mysteries of the sacred and secret wisdom and would not reveal it to the non-initiated public. The candidate, to become a true disciple, *chela*, has to undergo a rigorous process of renunciation (*vairagya*), discernment (*viveka*), freeing from all the egoism (*ahankara*), a total dedication or surrender (*sraddha*) by removing all kinds of material desires and family bonds and by controlling the whole body.

The initiation ceremony is preceded by "a vigil and fast", when the candidate shows his 'imperfect' state by stammering when he speaks, limping when he walks, keeping the last three fingers of his left hand clenched in his fist till he appears before the *guru* for the ceremony.²³

The different stages of the rite of *diksha* are the following.²⁴ 1. A rite of prayer and homage to the *guru* by the candidate. 2. A test of the knowledge of the sectarian doctrines of his powers of endurance, of his devotion to the *guru*, etc. 3. A fire ceremony in which symbolic funeral ceremonies over the candidate, is performed. 4. The *abhisheka* or aspersion of the candidate with consecrated water by the *guru* to purify him. 5. A test of the candidate's proficiency in the practical teachings of the sect, e.g., the technique of sitting in a particular *asana*, posture; breathing exercises, relaxation, harnessing the mind, concentration, mediation and worship. 6. Finally, the whispering into the ears of the candidate, the *rahasya* (secret doctrine) or the *mantra* (magic formula) of the cult, through which, as believed by the tradition, power and

²¹A. Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975, 186.

²²B. Walker, "Initiation", in *Hindu World*, Vol.I, 485-486.

²³*Ibid.*, 486.

²⁴*Ibid.*486.

enlightenment, appropriate for his grade is communicated to him in a flash.

The initiate of the sect is considered superior to the uninitiated public in the *Tantrik* tradition; he is called *vira* or hero, as different from the *pasu* or the common herd of people²⁵. The master-disciple relationship of Advaita tradition is presented in Sankara's *Upadesasahasri*, or *Thousand Teachings*. The *guru*-disciple relationship is institutionalized by the foundation of four monasteries or *mathas* in the four directions: *Sringerimatha* in the South, *Govardhanamatha* in the East, *Saradmatha* in the West and *Jyothirmatha* in North and the creation of orders or *darshanas*²⁶. The disciple should be "dispassionate toward all things non-eternal²⁷", one who has "abandoned the desire for sons, wealth and world and reached the state of *paramahansa* wandering ascetic²⁸", and one who has "tranquility, self-control, and compassion²⁹". Service and obedience to the *guru* are also essential qualities of the disciples.

4. Characterization of *Guru-Sishya* in *Bhagavad Gita*

The very setting of the book of the *Gita* is the relationship between the supreme Master Krishna and the Indian ideal disciple Arjuna at a critical point of battle between Pandavas and Kauravas. It is symbolic of a critical moment of seeking true direction and guidance to attain victory over the evil and *mukti* or salvation from the bondage of ignorance and sin.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 486.

²⁶Cf. S. Mayeda, trs., *A Thousand Teachings. The Upadesasahasri of Sankara*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press 1979. For an analysis of the Master-Disciple relationship in the *Thousand Teachings of Sankara* Cf. Cornille, *The Guru*, 41-49. It consists of a metrical part as a textbook for the disciples and a prose part as a guide for the teachers, explaining the means of final liberation.

²⁷S. Mayeda, *Thousand Teachings*, 2.1.2.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 2.1.2. P.V. Kane describes how the ascetics are classified as *kuticaka*, who can beg only from his sons; *bahudaka*, who can beg from Brahmins and upper class; *hamsa*; who are allowed to beg from village people and *Paramahansa*, who begs from all casts of people. Cf. *History of Dharmasastra*, II, Poona: Oriental Research Institute, 1974, 930-31.

²⁹S. Mayda, *Thousand Teachings*, 2.1.2: "This supreme Knowledge should not be given to a student who is not tranquil but should be taught to a student who is dispassionate and obedient", *Ibid.*, 1.17.85. Cf. Also *Brihad. Up.* 4.4.23.

At the battlefield Arjuna, who is perplexed by the thought of waging war against his relatives, teachers and other noble men, says to Krishna, the charioteer of Arjuna: "My nature is weighed down with the tint of feeble mindedness; my understanding is confused as to duty. I am your disciple. Do instruct me who have taken refuge in you" (B,G, II.7).

The characters of the *guru* and the disciple are vivid and alive throughout the narratives of Gita, which contains the supreme insights and spiritual depth of Indian discipleship and spirituality. This thought leads me to look into the vision of Gita on the characterization of the ideal disciple and an ideal *guru*.

4.1. Characterization of a *Guru* in the *Bhagavad Gita*

In the *Gita* the supreme master is Krishna, the God-incarnate, to establish supreme righteousness. He appears as an ideal teacher, who comes down to the human level to teach the divine and the human understandings of the realities encountered in life. It is a way of life and knowledge that he imparts to every man who seeks an answer to the real problems of life.

1) He is the teacher of Eternal Truths

He is the incarnate God and endowed with divine powers. He teaches that He is the Lord of everything and dwells in all beings (B.G. XVIII. 61; X.20) in everything (II.17; IX.4) and everywhere (VI.30). Everything originates from Him (VII. 10; X.20) and he is the end of all (IX. 18; X.20). He is the life-giver of all beings (VII.9; XV.14). Since he is the absolute God he can, and only he can, teach the eternal truths.

2) He is a Personal and Loving Teacher

He establishes a personal and loving relationship with his disciple. It is a symbol of God-man relationship, coming down to the level of man to establish a relationship with him. He calls Arjuna, "beloved" and "steadfast of heart", which expresses a human loving relationship. "Listen again to My supreme word, the profoundest of all. You are beloved of Me and steadfast in heart; therefore, I shall tell what is your good" (B.G. XVIII.64). Krishna is pictured as a God, who loves the mankind. The phrase "man is dear to me" appears several times in the *Gita*. He is the

Incarnate God to redeem man. His devotees find a special place in his heart, and all those seek a refuge, find grace and mercy in Him (XII.14-20). The human metaphors used of loving relationship such as, "father and the son", "friend and friend" "a lover and his beloved" are expressions of personal loving relationship towards man (B.G. XI.44).

He is a God of impartial love and equality of its expression. Lord Krishna opens man's eye to see a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog and an outcast with the same consideration. (B.G. V.18). He wants us to treat the friends and enemies, saints and sinners with the same scale. (B.G. VI.9). He is the saviour of the world and of the individuals, out of His compassion and love³⁰. He is a God of mutual and reciprocal love. "In whatsoever way devoted men approach Me, in the same way do I return their love" (BG. IV.II).

Another important aspect of the love of Lord Krishna, as depicted in the *Gita*, is its saving power. To every disciple, He shows His saving love by His presence and deliverance. He says "no devotee of Mine is ever lost" (B.G. IX. 31). His words are so consoling and loving to all those who are suffering. He is depicted as the saviour of the devotees. He is a refuge to all and a deliverer from all the evils of world. "I promise you truly, for you are dear to me. Give up all things to the law, turn to Me, your only refuge. I will deliver you from all evils, have no care" (BG. XVIII.56f).

The teacher in the *Gita* is a divine Master, a true model of a teacher, who can lead every disciple to the fullness of knowledge, to the real goal of life. He is also an example of sharing his own life and love to redeem every disciple in the divine and human spheres of his life.

4.2. Characterization of Disciples in the *Gita*

According to K.D. Bharadwaj, 'a disciple is one who is intoxicated with God-consciousness, singing his glory, contemplating him and immersed in his worship'.³¹ God becomes the father, mother, friend and

³⁰R. De Smet, "The Integrative doctrine of the Bhagavad Gita", in C.M. Vadakkekara, ed., *Prayer and Contemplation*, Bangalore: Asirvanam, 1980, 156f.

³¹K.D. Bharadwaj, *The Philosophy of Ramanuja*, New Delhi: Sri Sankar Hall Charitable Trust Society, 1958, 168.

the son, the learning and the wealth of the true disciple.³² He is truly dedicated to the divine tasks. The *Gita* puts forward certain characteristics of a true disciple.³³

1) Exclusive Dedication to the Master

An exclusive and total dedication and commitment of deep love and trust are demanded of the disciple. "Fix your mind on Me; be devoted to Me; Sacrifice unto Me; bow down to Me. Having thus make yourself steadfast in me. Taking Me as the Supreme Goal" (BG. IX.34). "Fix your mind on Me alone; Let your thoughts dwell in Me. You will hereafter live in Me alone" (B.G. XII. 8).³⁴ When a *bhakta* prays and worships with undivided heart, God's presence is experienced everywhere.

2) The Duty-consciousness (*svadharmavabodha*)

The great and the central theme of the *Gita* is performance of one's own duty or dharma without low level intentions. Everybody is destined by God to do the duties assigned to him. Krishna, the master, instructs Arjuna, his disciple to do his duties as a devotion to God. A *bhakta* is expected to do the duties assigned to him without any selfish desires.³⁵ If somebody discards his duty, it shall be a sin.³⁶ Performing the duty is equal to offer worship to God, because the fruit of the actions ultimately go to God and it is the way to attain union with God.³⁷

3) The *Bhakta*, an Instrument in the Hands of the *Guru*

³²Cf. B.G. IX. 17.

³³There are four types of disciples according to the *Gita*: the *artha* or the afflicted one; the *jijnasuh*, the inquiring one; the *artharthi*, the desirous of wealth and the possessor of knowledge or the *bhakta*. Cf. B.G. VII, 16.

³⁴Cf. Ramanuja, *Gita-bhasya*, 12: 6-7. He says that this exclusiveness is attained by meditating on Him with exclusive devotion. There are many places in the *Gita*, where this attitude of the *bhakta* is denoted: Cf. B.G. VIII. 14; 22; IX. 13; XIII, 10 etc.

³⁵S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, 488.

³⁶Swami Chinmayananda, *The Holy Gita*, Bombay: Sri Ram Bhakta Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 89.

³⁷P. Satwalekar, "Karma Yoga", *Studies in the Gita*, ed. M.D. Paradkar, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1970, 11-15.

The total self-surrender of the disciple makes him as an instrument in the hands of the *guru*. Arjuna, the model of the true *Bhakti*, surrenders himself to Krishna, even the control of his life, symbolized by making the *Guru* to drive his chariot. Then everything becomes controlled by God, as an instrument in the hands of God. The moment we cease to be conscious of being the doer of our actions, we will be freed from the illusion of self. Because, our longing to be the subject of our actions exist only as an illusion.³⁸

4) Total Surrender to the Will of the Master

A true disciple totally surrenders his reason to the enormous knowledge of God. R. Panikkar says, 'action belongs to the absolute necessity of man and of God. Maintaining the world and sustaining the life of man are the constant activity of God, who cannot cease to be active even for a moment'³⁹. A total surrender of the disciple to the supreme Master of his life, with a true devotion and unselfishness, enables the supreme God to indwell in him and act in and through him. According to the *Gita*, when a man totally surrenders his will the supreme Master, he not only surrenders his right to action, but also the fruits of his actions. The actions of a true *bhakta* should be unselfish and devoid of hope for any reward. As S. Chinmayananda puts it, one must fight in the silent battle of life, with unselfish motivations. Such an unselfishly motivated life, in the hands of the Lord, will lead to the feeling that "I am the Supreme".⁴⁰

The *Gita* pictures Arjuna as an ideal disciple of Krishna, to whom he has totally dedicated everything in his life, and is totally controlled by Him alone. Here he loses all self-interests. The Lord who dwells in Him is a God in the hearts of all the beings (B.G. XVIII.61).

³⁸Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, Mangalore: Sri Rama Krishna Ashram, 1969, 32f. to think oneself as the doer of actions comes from ignorance and pride: Cf. B.G. III. 27. XIII.29. It is by giving oneself totally to the hands of the Master, he can be freed from the sense of the doer.

³⁹R. Panikkar, *Vedic Experience*, London: Longman and Todd, 1977, 425f.

⁴⁰S. Chinmayananda, *The Bhagavat Gita*, Thiruparaitthura: Sri Ramakrishna tapovanam, 1982, 194-195.

5) A Disciple is a Man of Sacrifice (*Yajna*)

The action or the *karma* of man should be seen as a sacrifice to be offered so that he is freed from the bondage of sin. The suffering undertaken for an action in the life of a *bhakta* or the *yajna* should be motivated by unselfishness. The fundamental basis of the *Yajna* is the example of God Himself, who was involved in an *yajna* during His creative and sustaining activities⁴¹. Only sacrifice can break the law and the sin, can free one from all bondage (B.G. IV.23) and can lead to the true knowledge of God (B.G. IV.24).

According to Chinmayananda, a true disciple or a *bhakta* is the one who performs the work assigned to him, the *karma*, as a sacrifice or *Yajna*. He defines *Yajna* as "self-sacrificing work undertaken in a spirit of self-dedication, for the blessing of all"⁴². The *Gita* does not advocate a pure contemplative or ascetic life, devoid of all actions. At the same time, actions devoid of any contemplation and asceticism are seen as futile.⁴³ We may say a spiritualized dynamic active life is best suited for a disciple.

6) A Disciple- a Man of Renunciation of Desire for Fruits of his Actions (*phal thrshna vairagya*)

The disciple has usually two duties to perform. A) the duties of his state of life or the *svadharma* and b) the duties of his religious state, i.e., sacrificial obligations.⁴⁴ These are entrusted to him by the Supreme and he has to perform it with selfless motivation (*niskama karma*) and with a motive of abandoning the fruits of the action (*karma phala tyaga*) (B.G. VI.1; XVIII. 2.6.). The *Gita* does not see renunciation (*samnyasam*) as a life of inaction (*naiskarmya*). It does teach salvation (*mukti*) can be attained only by disinterested action.

A true disciple is interested to do his duties as a commitment and not as a man longing for rewards. His involvement in action is not an entanglement with the world. As his heart is situated in the supreme

⁴¹Cf. Pnikkar, *Vedic Experience*, 443f.

⁴²Chinmayananda, *Holy Gita*, 169.

⁴³B.G. III. 8;27.

⁴⁴Cf. B.G. XVIII. 41; B.G. II; B.G. XVI.15.

reality, he is able to enjoy "a holy indifference", serenity, and peace.⁴⁵ Then he is led to a higher attitude of *Nirahankara* the elimination of ego-sense and it frees him from the bondage of action itself.⁴⁶ Then he becomes a completely God-centred man, unattached to action and its fruits and freed from the bondage of sin and egoism. This complete God-centredness is termed *mayi sarvani karmani samnyasya* and is the supreme offering and sacrifice or *yajna* to God.

It leads the disciple to a state of equanimity or *samatva*, by a subjective sameness regarding the joys and sorrows, praise and accusations and other contradictory human experiences; by an objective sameness, regarding people as good, bad or indifferent; friend, enemy or indifferent and by a transcendence called *gunatita*, in which he is not disturbed by nothing of the worldly things.⁴⁷

In turn the disciple is led to brahmanhood, a stage in which he transcends all the bodily and the worldly attachments of the three-fold *gunas*, gets freed from birth, death, old age and sorrow and attains *moksa*, immortality.⁴⁸

7) A Disciple, a Man of True Vision and Knowledge (*Jnanin*)

A detached man with devotion and commitment will be endowed with knowledge, true and genuine. Here the knowledge becomes the supreme instrument of relationship with the supreme Reality and the *bakta* becomes aware of the fact that there is nothing greater than knowledge. It is from the deep communion with the divine that the knowledge is attained and by this knowledge, one reaches God. (B.G. XVIII.50) and He removes the darkness of ignorance with the light of His divine knowledge (B.G. X.10). It is the loving devotion or *bhakti* with which a devotee approaches God, as he is, that enables him to attain true knowledge. This true knowledge is the knowledge of God "as I am" (B.G. XVIII. 55).

⁴⁵Panikkar, *Vedic Experience*, 443f.

⁴⁶G.W. Kaveeshawar, *The Ethics of the Gita*, Delhi:1971, 10-11.

⁴⁷Dasgupta, *Indian Philosophy*, 511f.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 512f.

8) A disciple, who attains Union with God (*Yogin*)

A disciple becomes a *yogin*, when he has attained a supreme *para-bhakti*, an advanced communion of love, with the Supreme, through his devotion. Krishna asks Arjuna to become a *yogin*. "The *yogin* is superior to the performers of austere penance, and is considered to be superior even to the performers of religious rites also. Therefore, O! Arjuna, do you become a *yogin*" (B.G. VI.46).

The characterization of the *yogin* in the *Gita* is noteworthy. He is essentially different from all other men. He is simply drawn to God (B.G. XIV.15). He loves and is absorbed in God (B.G. VII.47) and comes to a stage of likeness with God (B.G. XIV.2) and attains a knowledge of God as he is (B.G. XVIII.55) and gets united with him in a supreme contemplation. According to *Gita*, it is a mystic stage, where he enjoys absolute bliss, peace and tranquility, reaching above all bodily and worldly pleasures and identifying himself with the divine.

5. The *Guru-Chela* and the Jesus-Disciple Relationships

The religious character of the whole process of discipleship in the *guru-chela* system is striking. There appears at first sight great resemblance to the discipleship of Jesus, in many of the areas, though there are differences, which are explicit. The personal orientation of the disciples to the person of the *guru* as the deity incarnate, the divine succession of the *guru* from a God, the insistence on celibate life for the *guru*, the idea of the *guru* as the spiritual parent who dispels darkness and the vehicle of divine powers, etc. are points of great resemblance. The absolute need of the *guru*, especially for salvation, the concept of the *ādiguru* (a God who is the founder of the order), the worship of the *guru* as the living flame of the divine truth, the belief that only the *guru* has the 'secrets of the sect' and hence he only can initiate the disciples to divine enlightenment, etc. are also similar to the Christian idea of the Master. The *chela* at the service of the *guru*; the insistence on the need of renunciation, discernment and total surrender; the practice of 'vigil and fast', prayers, the symbolic funeral function over the candidate to signify that he is dead to the world; the test of the knowledge, powers of endurance, devotion to the *guru*, etc. the concept of the superiority of the disciples over the rest of the 'world'; the effectiveness of the actions (looks,

words, curses and blessings) of the *guru*; the extra-ordinarily divine and solemn respect and veneration that the *guru* demands from the disciple (e.g. the *sashtanga*, the prostration of the eight members), the appointment of the successor of the order by the *guru* from his disciples previously selected by him; the *pada-kanika*, the feet offering, as a sign of reverence to the *guru*, the public reception of the *guru* by singing his odes and praises, spreading the clothes on the road, procession on the back of an animal (here an elephant), etc. are also the various similarities that can be detected when we study both comparatively.

A few existential and novel differences make the discipleship with Jesus something unique in the world. Jesus Christ, for Christians is the Absolute teacher, the only one incarnate God, with no parallel. On the contrary, the Hindu system admits many incarnate deities, and so many *ādigurus*, depending on different orders of the cult, with no uniformity. In Hinduism, the characteristics of the disciple differ from *guru* to *guru* and from cult to cult. The characteristics of Jesus-disciple relationship is unique and the same anywhere in the world. Another difference can be the initiative of Jesus and the freedom, by which he calls the disciples, where as in Hindu tradition, the disciples select the *guru*.

6. A Search for the Soul of India

If we want to search for the soul of India, we must search in the ashrams, especially in the ancient ashrams of India⁴⁹. In the opening scene of Bhasa's *Svapna-vasavadatta*, the dramatist narrates the natural qualities of an ashram. It is a place where the deers move without fear, the trees carry plenty of flowers and fruits, the brown cows yield plenty of milk and smoke rising from many alters into the sky. The ashrams cultivated an eco-friendly atmosphere, with non-violence and affection, solitude and silence, feeling of the sublime and the transcendent, hospitality and love

⁴⁹According to Kalidasa, an *ashram* is a place of serenity and peace, calm and solitude: "*shantam idam ashramamapadam*" (Cf. *Shakunthalam*, 1, 16). The term ashram comes from "ā" + "śram", to mean (1) 'no fatigue', 'no weariness', when it is interpreted, *ā* = to or opposite to, and *śram* = effort, penance, discipline, etc. In this sense it means, a place of rest and peace. It can also mean a place of penance, self-discipline or *tapas*. Here the 'a' means great or big. Thus, ashram is a place of asceticism and peace.

and a synthesis of *Jnana*, *Bhakti* and *karma*. Religious atmosphere of the ashrams was praiseworthy⁵⁰. Every ashram was illumined by the personal charm and sublime ideals of the *guru*. The *guru-sishya* relationship was the fundamental institution of the ashram, it was through this institution the noble ideas, and sublime knowledge of the Absolute were transmitted from generation to generation.

The ashrams were centers of learning, both spiritual and religious, cultural and social. Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the spiritual epic, and the *Abhijnana-sakuntalam* of Kalidasa, the great dramatic *kavya*, came from their ashram experience.⁵¹ The Krishna and Kuchela were educated in the *Gurukula* tradition of the ashram of Rishi Sandipani.

As the *Taittiriya Upanisad* 1,2,2 points out, the ashram was a place, where guests are not only welcome, but also considered as representatives of God himself. The slogan was *atithi devo bhava*, let a guest be God to you. Bandhu Ishanand remembers how

The ancient ashrams were not surrounded by barbed wires or walls. Not even wild animals felt threatened by the ashram structures... The ashram spoke silently about the ideals of the then society and they remained not only as models but also sources of energy for living these ideals. Kings and nobles, sinners and outcasts, poor and the sick flocked to the ancient ashrams, and all were welcomed warmly.⁵²

They were examples of hospitality. The ashramites were "a tender, loving and cheerful lot: very hospitable to the guests, caring and snaring among themselves, and compassionate to the needy and the suffering. The rituals, austerities and life in solitude do not make them unhappy"⁵³.

⁵⁰B. Ishanand, "Ashrams and Mission Spirituality", *Third Millennium*, II, 1999, 2. 131-136.

⁵¹'The sharp stones with the shells of nuts near them, the deer calmly and fearlessly walking around, the wet lines of the drops of water on the path from the clothes (the *valkala*), the smoke rising to the air from the sacrificial fire, are the signs of an ashram nearby' (Cf. *Sakuntalam*, 1,1-18).

⁵² Ishanand, "Ashrams", 135.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 135.

7. A Changed Vision for the Master-Disciple Tradition

We all know that the fundamental institution, the source of the ideals and ideologies of a community, is the formation centre, where the disciples are formed according to the vision and teaching of the master, in whose name the community is established. We also know discipleship belongs to the fundamental criteria of a genuine community. It follows without telling that it is necessary to reorganize the master-disciple tradition according to the pattern of the great *guru*, Jesus Christ, and in the context of the great Indian ashramite ideals, which we may have neglected through the past centuries. We are also far away from a possibility of a dialogue with our neighbours, who cherish a long history of ancient Indian spirituality and asceticism, when we still depend on alienated and "stitched-together" forms of our ideals and their expressions in our religious and social levels.

Conclusion

India has a rich heritage of a *guru-sishya* tradition, with lots of genuine spiritual and social insights that echo a similar ethos as that of Christianity. The ideals and ideologies of this rich tradition are not antiquated, though the ancient forms of their expression are no more valid in the modern world. The great spiritual values of the divine relationship with the Absolute and a mature spiritual outlook to the daily life, the great human and social values of hospitality, the human warmth, care and love for the poor and the suffering, the impartial and unselfish motives of relationship with all people, and above all, the expression of happiness on the face and in the heart, are to be restored in master-disciple tradition. It must convey to the world that a *sishya* of Christ lives up to the ideals of the master and makes the people follow the same path. It must be put in an Indian context and form, valid to the modern man. The *guru-sishya* tradition of India and the rich spiritual and social values of Indian ashrams can be a model for the third millennium.

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