

THE GURU AND SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

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Need for training in spiritual life

A disciple of the great Chinese mystic philosopher Lao Tsu narrates the following story. A young man joined the gang of a robber chief named Chi. One day the young apprentice asked his leader, ‘Can the Tao (the right Way) be found in thieving?’ And Chi replied: ‘Pray tell me of anything in which there is no Tao, a law or right way. In thieving there is the wisdom by which the booty is located, the courage of going in first; the heroism of coming out last, the insight of calculating the chances of success; finally, there is justice in dividing the spoils equitably among the robbers. There never was a successful thief who did not possess these five qualities.’

There are principles to be learned in every activity of life, even in thieving. An apprentice in any profession needs training. This is all the more true of spiritual life. The disciple of Lao Tsu continues, ‘The doctrine of the wise is equally indispensable to the good man and to the robber. . . . Since good men are few and bad men are in the majority, the good the sages do in the world is little and the evil done by the rest is great.’ In the course of my travels in the West I have been amazed at the amount of energy which is constantly expended on destructive activities. How many soldiers, pilots, technicians and even scientists are being trained for war? Why can’t even a fraction of the same time and energy be used for training in the spirit, in making ourselves receptive to divine illumination, bliss and peace?

The ideal which the great sages of the Upaniṣads place before us as the goal of life is Self-realization. But this ideal cannot be realized without spiritual awakening. However, in the religious field we see too much of ritual and ceremonial and too little of true spiritual awakening. Real religion, which is Self-realization, has for this reason become discredited. And there is now an over-abundance of religious pretenders who claim supernatural powers and promise easy passports to heaven, while parasites unwilling to strive for moral purity want to attain salvation easily.

The highest goal can be shown only by a person who has attained it or by one who has at least gone very near it. Regarding the importance of right guidance in spiritual life, the Upaniṣads declare:

Many do not hear about the Self. Many others, though they hear of it, do not under-

stand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Wonderful is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to realize it.¹

The truth of the Self cannot be fully understood when taught by an inferior person, for there are different opinions regarding it. Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, beyond all logic. When taught by a teacher who has realized himself as one with Brahman, a person attains the goal and becomes free from transmigration.²

Let a man devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of heavenly enjoyment. To know the Eternal, let him humbly approach a guru established in Brahman and well versed in the scriptures. To a disciple who approaches reverently, who is tranquil and self-controlled, the wise teacher gives that knowledge, faithfully and without stint, by which is known the truly existing, changeless Self.³

Function of the Guru

What does Self-realization mean? It means the union of the individual spirit with the supreme Spirit. After passing through various experiences and sufferings in life, the individual soul draws closer to the Oversoul and finally realizes its oneness with It. The Upaniṣad gives a picturesque description of this process:

Two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, are perched on the branches of the same tree. One of them tastes the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the other, tasting neither, calmly observes. The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of its real divine nature, gets involved in worldly life and suffers. But when it recognizes the worshipful Lord as its own true Self and beholds His glory, it becomes liberated from sorrow.⁴

We have forgotten our true divine essence. So instead of moving closer to God, we get drowned in worldly existence more and more. Somebody must remind us of our real nature. He who does this is the guru or spiritual teacher. The function of the teacher is to awaken the disciple from his age-long sleep and show him the way to the Divine. The guru is not like the Christian priest who stands between man and God. The word guru etymologically means a spiritual guide who removes darkness and brings light. He helps us to dehypnotize ourselves by removing the false notions we have been entertaining about ourselves.

In one of his parables Sri Ramakrishna speaks of a tiger-sheep. Once a tigress attacked a flock of sheep but, as the shepherd resisted, she fell on her side, gave birth to a cub and died. The shepherd took pity on the little creature and raised it along with the flock. The little tiger drank sheep's milk and learned to bleat and eat grass like sheep. Years later another tiger attacked the same flock and was astonished to see a tiger behaving like a sheep. He caught hold of the tiger-sheep, dragged him to a pool and forced him to look at his reflection in the water. Then the old tiger put a piece of meat into the mouth of the young tiger-sheep, and told him that he was not a sheep but a real tiger.

Thereupon the tiger-sheep gave up his sheep consciousness and regained his real tiger

1 *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.7

2 *ibid.*, 1.2.8

3 *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12,13

4 *ibid.*, 3.1.1,2

consciousness.⁵

Swami Brahmananda used to liken the teacher to a king's minister. A poor man requests the minister to grant him an audience with the king who lives in a palace with seven gates. The minister grants his request, and leads him through the gates one after another. At each gate there stands a richly dressed officer, and each time the poor man asks the minister if that is the king. The minister answers 'No' each time, until they have passed the seventh gate and have come to the presence of the king seated there in all his regal splendour. Then the poor man does not ask any more questions. What he needed was somebody who could guide him through the gates and corridors of the palace. 'So is it with the guru', says Swami Brahmananda, 'Like the king's minister, he leads the disciple through the different stages of spiritual unfoldment until he leaves him with the Lord.'⁶

The human personality is like a big palace with buildings and courtyards one within another. The supreme Spirit comes to us in the form of a teacher, making us realize that we are not the physical body, not the mind, not the feelings, ideas and emotions, but the Spirit eternal. When we travel to an unknown country, it is wise to have a guide who knows the way. The guru is the guide who leads us to our destination and leaves us there.

Need for a Guru

In India we take the necessity of a guru for granted in spiritual life. When I first went to Europe I was surprised to hear some religious groups saying that they could commune with God, hear the voice of God, get directions about spiritual life without any special training. I studied a few cases and found, as I had expected, that these people were hearing their own voices which sometimes were good. God and the divine Voice are far off from an impure soul. A well-trained, pure-hearted person can certainly commune with God, the indwelling Spirit, but when impure and untrained individuals make the same claim, they only deceive themselves. And yet they say they need no outside help. My teacher Swami Brahmananda used to say, 'One requires a teacher even when one wants to learn stealing. And this sublime Brahmagyā, the knowledge of Brahman — does it not require a teacher to acquire it?'⁷

There is no mystery in this. People go to Madame Curie to study the properties of radium; they go to Rutherford to learn about the nature of the atom. As in natural science the guidance of a competent teacher is necessary, so in spiritual science the guidance of a guru is absolutely necessary to learn the technique of realizing the Self. Here we are travelling into regions of which we know nothing. Those who do not feel the need of any teacher, who are over-anxious to be teachers of others, should remember that the blind should not try to lead the blind.

Hindu scriptures repeatedly stress the importance of the guru. Take for instance the Bhagavad-Gītā. In it Kṛṣṇa at first simply takes Arjuna to the battlefield, without giving

5 See The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 306-7.

6 Swami Prabhavananda, The Eternal Companion (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 250

7 Spiritual Talks (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1944), p. 42-43

him any spiritual instruction. Then Arjuna pleads with Him: 'Overpowered by grief, my mind is confused regarding the right path. I supplicate You as Your disciple, instruct me who have taken refuge in You.'⁸ It is only when Arjuna accepts Kṛṣṇa as the guru does the divine Teacher begin His teaching. In Śaṅkara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination we find the disciple appealing to his teacher: 'O Master, I have fallen into the sea of birth and death. Save me from this misery.'⁹

The power of spiritual initiation

Sri Ramakrishna says, 'One must have an awakening of the Spirit within in order to see the one unchanging imperishable Reality.' Mere reading and talking about spiritual truths is not enough. One should directly perceive the Light within.

How is this first awakening to be brought about? An illumined teacher does this for the disciple through a process of spiritual initiation. In all religions there are initiation rites consisting of bath, baptism, sprinkling with holy water or oil, reciting of sacred texts, rituals of worship, etc. These practices make the initiates eligible for the special privileges of the religious communities into which they are admitted as members thereby. This formal initiation is very different from the spiritual initiation we are here speaking of.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'¹⁰ To be born again means to undergo spiritual awakening, to cease to identify oneself with one's body and realize oneself as the Spirit. 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'¹¹ Later on St. Peter, a disciple of Christ, explained the meaning of this passage: 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.'¹² The guru is one who transmits the word of God. The power of God comes through the word, the mantra, and through the mantra comes the awakening of the Spirit.

In India we have the ideal of the dvija, the twice-born. The word dvija also means a bird. First comes the egg, then out of the egg comes the fledgeling which will some day develop into a mature bird. All eggs do not get hatched; all fledgelings do not grow fully. Similarly, all people do not attain spiritual realization. People are in different stages of spiritual growth. A well-known Sanskrit verse says: 'By natural birth a man is born a Śūdra, an ignorant person; through purificatory rites he becomes a dvija, the twice-born; through study and knowledge of the scriptures he becomes a vipra, a scholar or poet; through the realization of the supreme Spirit he becomes a Brāhmaṇa, a knower of Brahman.'¹³ The purpose of spiritual initiation is to enable a person to become a true Brāhmaṇa, a knower of Brahman. The Upaniṣad says, 'He who departs from this world knowing the Imperishable, is a Brāhmaṇa.'¹⁴ Mahapurush Maharaj (Swami Shivananda), a great direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, once told me, 'Whoever comes to Sri Ra-

8 Bhagavad-Gītā 2.7

9 Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 139

10 Bible, St. John, 3:3

11 ibid., 3:6

12 Bible, I Peter, 1:23

13 Atri Smṛti 141-42

14 Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3. 8.10

makrishna is really a Brāhmaṇa.’

Spiritual initiation brings the individual Self into harmony with the supreme Self. A Chinese sage demonstrated the principle of natural harmony (Tao) in this way: he took two lutes and strung them identically. One he placed in an adjoining room, then struck the Kung note on the instrument he held. Immediately the Kung note on the second lute responded. When he struck the Chio note on one, the corresponding string of the second instrument vibrated, because they were tuned to the same pitch. If he changed the intervals on one lute the tones of the second were jangled and out of tune. The sound was there but the influence of the key note was gone. Similarly, we may read and think and talk. But all this will be of no avail unless we learn to attune our souls to the Oversoul, the supreme Self.

The power of initiation becomes manifest only in a pure soul who intensely yearns for God. Patañjali distinguishes three types of disciples: The soft (mṛdu) ones who cannot bear much the rigours of spiritual disciplines; the middling (madhyamā) ones who strive harder than the first; the intense (tīvra) type including those who struggle intensely for realization; they have learned the secret of withdrawing their minds from outside distractions, are always conscious of the divine Reality within them and have deep yearning for God.’¹⁵ Yearning for God should always be regarded as a mark of divine Grace.

At the beginning of my own spiritual life the path seemed very difficult. When I asked Swami Brahmananda what I should do, his reply was, ‘Struggle, struggle.’ It is not enough to get directions from a guru; one must struggle incessantly. The disciple must first of all yearn with all his heart to know the Truth. To those who are prepared for it the awakening may come all of a sudden. To others who are struggling it comes gradually.

When we are in a joyous mood, we are able to transmit that joy to others. In a similar way, a good spiritual teacher is able to communicate spiritual vibrations to his disciple. We have seen the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna exercising this power on many occasions. They were great storehouses of spiritual power, but they used it with great caution. Normally a guru transmits his power through a mantra.

The power of the Mantra

A monastic disciple once asked Mahapurush Maharaj, ‘All persons do not get spiritual awakening as soon as they are initiated. Will they not be benefited nevertheless?’ Mahapurushji replied, ‘Even though they may feel nothing at the time of initiation, the power of the holy Name given by an illumined teacher is unfailing. The spiritual power transmitted to the disciple in due course transmutes him and spiritual awakening follows.’

What about the initiation given by an advanced soul though not fully illumined? The ordinary advanced soul is about on a par with a senior in high school who, before he is ready for college himself, can still give elementary instruction to his juniors. As he himself progresses towards Truth; he strives to awaken spiritual consciousness in others. The initiation given by an ordinary guru who is sufficiently advanced in spiritual life also

15 Cf. Patañjali, Yoga-Sūtra 1. 22

brings about spiritual awakening in the course of time, if the recipient sincerely follows the spiritual path. The mantra or the divine Name itself contains tremendous power. Śrī Caitanya teaches us this truth: ‘Various are Thy names revealed by Thee into which Thou hast infused Thine own omnipotent powers, and no limitations of time for remembering those names are ordained by Thee.’¹⁶

Patañjali, speaking about the effect of repeating Om and other holy Names, says that it removes the various obstacles on the path and leads to the awareness of the indwelling Spirit.¹⁷ What are these obstacles? They are illness, doubt, mental disturbances, etc. Repetition of the mantra introduces a new rhythm, harmony, into the personality, which calms the nerves and unifies the powers of the mind. And in due course, this leads to the awakening of the Spirit within. A beginner in meditative life may not be able to understand the power of the mantra. But if he sincerely repeats it, he will gradually realize its power. Swami Brahmananda says, ‘Japam –japam – japam! Even while you work, practise japam. Keep the name of the Lord spinning in the midst of all your activities. If you can do this, all the burning of the heart will be soothed. Many sinners have become pure and free and divine by taking refuge in the name of God. Have intense faith in God and in His name, know that they are not different.’¹⁸

As the saints showed in the past, so in the present it has been proved time and again that the power of God does manifest through the divine Name. When the mantra given by a guru is treasured up within and constantly meditated upon, this power develops more and more in the aspirant. Sri Ramakrishna used to liken this process to the formation of a pearl. According to popular belief, the pearl-oyster waits until the star svāti (Arcturus) is in the ascendant. If at that time rain falls, the oyster will open its shell and collect a drop of that water. Then it will dive down to the seabed and remain there for several months until the rain drop is converted into a beautiful pearl.¹⁹ In the same way the heart of the devotee must be open to Truth and after receiving spiritual instruction from the guru, he must work on it with one-pointed zeal until the pearl of spiritual illumination is born.

The pure mind as Guru

Swami Brahmananda used to say, ‘There is no greater guru than your own mind.’ The human guru is not always at hand. Even if we are fortunate enough to secure the blessings and instructions of an advanced teacher, he may not be always available when we need him. But there is an inner teacher, our own purified mind, who is always present within us. Says Swami Brahmananda, ‘When the mind has been purified by prayer and contemplation it will direct you from within. Even in your daily duties, this inner guru will guide you and will continue to help you until the goal is reached.’²⁰

What does this mean? How does the mind act as the inner guru? The supreme Spirit, the source of all knowledge, the Teacher of all teachers, is ever present within the heart of everyone. When the mind is purified through moral life, prayer, meditation, etc., it

16 Śikṣāṣṭakam, 2

17 Yoga-Sūtra, 1.29

18 The Eternal Companion, op. cit. p. 297

19 Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 180-181

20 The Eternal Companion, op. cit. p. 251

comes in touch with the inner Light of the supreme Spirit. The purified mind becomes a channel for the flow of divine Knowledge. It receives spiritual guidance directly from the Teacher of teachers. When the mind thus learns to open itself to the inner Truth, it can receive instruction from many sources. The Bhāgavatam speaks of a wandering Avadhūta or ascetic who accepted so many natural objects as his upagurus, subsidiary teachers. From mother earth he learned the secret of patience, from air he learned detachment (as air remains unaffected by pleasant or bad odour), from the sky he learned freedom from all limitations, and so on.²¹

Many of you know how illumination came to Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth-century French mystic who spent his life in the kitchen of a monastery. The sight of a leafless tree in mid-winter stirred in him the reflection that leaves would be renewed, and flowers and fruits would appear on those bare branches. This revealed to him the presence and power of God lying hidden in all creation. The spiritual awakening that he then experienced sustained him throughout his life. In all of us the power of God is lying hidden, waiting for awakening. We have to discover the centre of divine Consciousness in us, and call forth the dormant power. It was this inner guru that Buddha asked his disciples to follow after his passing away. ‘Be a lamp unto yourself (ātmadīpo bhava)’, he told them.

But we must take care lest we should deceive ourselves. We may think that our mind has become a good guru that we are getting instructions everywhere, but there is always the danger of mistaking our own desires and thoughts for divine inspiration, divine Voice, etc. There is no such danger when we receive instruction from a living teacher who is spiritually advanced, and are guided by him. The human guru instructs his disciple to purify his soul by the practice of moral disciplines and selfless work. When the disciple errs, the guru notices it and brings him back to the right path. Those who are fortunate to have the guidance of a true human guru will not go astray. Gradually, through the guru’s blessings, the hidden faculty of intuition will awaken in the disciple, and from there onwards his purified, intuition will act as his guru. That is how one’s own mind becomes one’s guru.

Avatāra — the greatest Teacher

The greatest Teacher is, of course, the avatāra, the Divine Incarnation, who is, able to bring illumination to thousands of people. Swami Vivekananda used to say that avātara is a kapālamocana, one who can alter the destiny of people, one who can wipe out what is written on their foreheads, that is, their karma.²² No ordinary teacher has such a power of transformation. Jesus had the power to bring divine Light to those simple fishermen who attained illumination at his touch. He also had the power to transform impure souls whom people call sinners. When he told them, ‘Thy sins are forgiven; thy faith has made thee whole; go in peace’, they at once felt freed from all impurities.

But Jesus himself passed through initiation. What else was that scene of baptism in Jordan when, we are told, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him and he heard a voice saying: ‘This is my beloved son

²¹ Bhāgavatam, 11.7.9

²² The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), Vol. V, p. 324

in whom I am well pleased'. In modern times an increasingly large number of people regard Sri Ramakrishna as an Incarnation. He too received initiation from a human teacher. We are told that before he took up his work as priest in the Kālī temple, he was initiated by a Tāntric teacher (by name Kenaram Bhattacharya) of Calcutta. When the teacher uttered the mantra in his ears, Ramakrishna gave²³ a loud shout and was absorbed in ecstasy. The teacher said he had instructed many disciples but had never encountered anyone like Ramakrishna.

The Master in his turn initiated his great disciple Narendranath with the name of Rāma, and the young man's spiritual emotions were stirred to great heights. For several hours he was absorbed in a state of ecstasy. Later on, this disciple in turn became a dynamo of spirituality – Swami Vivekananda. In 1892, the year before Vivekananda went to America, an agnostic professor in one of the colleges of Madras argued with him regarding the truths of religion. Vivekananda just touched him, and the doubter was instantly transformed. Later on, this man renounced the world and lived and died a saint.

Sri Ramakrishna had the power to raise others to great heights of higher consciousness by transmitting spiritual energy even by a mere look or wish. Swami Shivananda (Mahapurush Maharaj) has narrated his own experience as follows: 'One day I was meditating when the Master came near me. No sooner had he glanced at me than I burst into tears. He stood still without uttering a word. A sort of creeping sensation passed through me and I began to tremble all over. The Master congratulated me on attaining that state.'

Later in life Swami Shivananda himself, like many of his brother disciples, became a spiritual teacher of great power, as he was when we met him. This power manifested itself in him all the more when he became the head of the Order. About the year 1923 a spiritual seeker from Sind came to the Swami for initiation. The devotee had received a mantra in a dream but, as he could not understand its significance, his mind had become restless. Mahapurush Maharaj took him to the shrine room, initiated him, and asked him to meditate for a time. Then the Swami returned to his room with his face radiant and his mind overpowered by divine emotion, for he knew that something significant was happening in the shrine. The new disciple had a wonderful experience. The moment he received the holy Name, a new spiritual consciousness awakened in him, tears started rolling down his cheeks and he entered into deep meditation. When he returned to his guru, he related how through his grace his heart was filled with divine peace. He said that the mantra given to him during initiation was the same mantra he had received in his dream, but only then he understood what it signified. Mahapurush Maharaj then told him: 'My child, it is the Lord Himself who has blessed you today. He alone can show mercy to others. We are only instruments in His hands. The Lord manifests Himself in the heart of the guru and transmits spiritual power into the heart of the disciple. I have dedicated you to the Lord who has taken charge of your life and destiny.'²⁴

23 Cf. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), p. 134-136

24 For more details see *For Seekers of God*, translated by Swami Vividishananda and Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 164-165

The eternal Teacher

There is a saying that the human guru utters a mantra in the ears of a disciple, while the world Teacher speaks in the heart of the devotee. Real initiation takes place when God awakens the spiritual consciousness of a seeker. The real guru is the immanent God, the indwelling supreme Spirit who is the Goal, the Controller, the Lord, the Witness, the Abode, the Refuge, the Friend, the Origin and Dissolution of the universe, its Substratum, the Repository of all knowledge and the eternal Seed.²⁵

When the ordinary teacher and the pupil meet, each tries to see God in the other. The disciple looks upon the teacher as a visible manifestation of the supreme Spirit, the Teacher of all teachers, as a channel for the flow of divine Grace. It is in this spirit that he serves him, obeys him and worships him. The well-known verses repeated by thousands of people in India express this idea:

I bow to the divine guru who, by the application of the collyrium of Knowledge, opens the eyes of one blinded by the disease of ignorance. I bow to the divine guru who imparts to the disciple the fire of Self-knowledge and burns away his bonds of karma accumulated through many births.²⁶

I offer my salutations to the beneficent Being who is incarnate in the guru, the Light of whose absolute Existence shines forth in the world of appearance, who instructs the disciples with the holy text, 'That thou art', realizing whom the soul nevermore returns to the ocean of birth and death.²⁷

The Jīvātman, the individual Self, is interpenetrated and pervaded by the Paramātman, the supreme Self. But, owing to ignorance, the soul does not realize this truth. The purpose of initiation is to remove the veil of ignorance. Once this veil is lifted, the contact can be maintained through regular spiritual practice.

The old law of supply and demand is at work in spiritual life too. If a seeker feels a tremendous yearning for the light of Truth, that light must come to him from some source or other. Something happens to him, his heart opens to divine Grace, divine Light bursts upon him. And as he moves closer to the ultimate Reality, he sees the Light of the supreme Spirit shining in all beings. And when he becomes one with the supreme Spirit, the Teacher of all teachers, he too becomes a channel of divine Knowledge for others. He serves all beings knowing well that he is serving the Lord alone, the eternal Teacher who is teaching, awakening, illuminating and guiding souls throughout the ages.



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25 Bhagavad-Gītā, 9.18

26 *Guru Stotram*.

27 *Śrī Ṣaṅkarācārya, Dakṣiṇāmūrti-Stotram*, 3.