

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GURUS

By Sri Rama Ramanuja Achari

Resorting to a Preceptor

The Spiritual Preceptor — *acharya* — has an essential place in all the great Wisdom Traditions of the world. Taking refuge in an abstract and seemingly distant Divine Being is somewhat troublesome, but taking refuge in a learned, compassionate, caring and wise person is much easier, as such a person is present and approachable. In this age of consumerism and “shopping” how does one know if a “guru” is genuine or not. There are many people who go from one spiritual teacher to another — shopping around for one who will tell them what they want to hear. There is also no lack of “Spiritual Teachers” who are quite willing to tell their disciples whatever they think they want to hear in order to enjoy some economic benefits and thrill of power and exploitation.

The concept of the guru is pivotal to Indian civilization and culture. A guru is the *sine qua non* for the study of all sciences — art, sculpture, architecture, medicine, music, politics, law etc. and off course for spirituality.

The guru is not merely a teacher but also a guide, mentor, a surrogate parent, a role model and a friend.

The term *guru* means “the remover of ignorance”, it also means “heavy” — i.e. heavy with knowledge and experience.

In ancient India teaching was one-on-one through the guru-kula system in which students would live with the guru and serve him in payment for the teaching.

The purpose of education was not only the transmission of knowledge but also the modelling and reshaping of the individual into an “Aryan” which means a “noble” person possessed of right thinking and practice, high mindedness, honour, fairness and compassion — a transformation of the whole person – spiritually, intellectually and morally.

Our primary gurus are our parents. The scriptures say that there are four tangible forms of Divinity in the world: mother, father, teacher and a needy stranger.

All these need to be treated with the same veneration that one would show to the gods themselves were they to appear!

According to the orthodox Vedic tradition the credentials of the guru or acharya are established from the lineage or *sampradaya*. to which he/she belongs. No knowledge is considered as valid unless it comes from a Preceptor who belongs to an authorised lineage and actually practices the teaching and lives a spiritual life.

The greatest of all spiritual masters in the *Srivaishnava Sampradaya* was Ramanuja (11th century). There is nothing that can be added to or subtracted from his teachings. Therefore all contemporary acharyas must confine themselves to re-interpreting the teachings of Ramanuja to suit changing social circumstances — not inventing new doctrines. Taking refuge in a bonafide acharya is an integral part of the path of taking refuge. One cannot learn about the Ultimate Truth from the Scriptures through personal reading and self-interpretation — the teaching must come from an authority. In matters of health one does not consult a doctor who is self taught, one goes to a specialist who has studied in a recognised school of medicine. In the same manner in order to understand the Ultimate Truth as it really is, one goes to a properly qualified acharya.

Definition of an acharya

The term acharya means *one-who-teaches-by-example* and according to the Pancharatra Agama all acharyas — must be possessed of the following qualities.

1. They must be strict followers of the Vedic tradition and therefore faultless in conduct.
2. They must have unflinching faith in God.
3. They must be free of egotism.
4. They must understand the three sacred mantras along with the esoteric meaning.
5. They must be able to explain the meaning of the Scriptures to others in a skilful manner.
6. They can be living as a householder pursuing the Four Aims but should be free of attachment.

The acharyas must be of unimpeachable conduct and above all, compassionate. The prospective disciple should observe and test them until convinced of their noble character, learning and compassion. The function of an acharya is to interpret and explain the teachings of the Scriptures in harmony with the teachings of the previous acharyas in the lineage (*Sampradaya*). The acharya is not permitted to formulate and transmit personal theories and indulge in arbitrary self-interpretation and speculation. All new commentaries (*bhashyas*) on the Scriptures are backed up with copious quotations from previous acharyas to prove that the present rendering is true, in spirit, to the original.

The acharya once chosen and accepted should not be treated as an ordinary person, but as a manifestation of the *Mercy of God*. The acharya is presumably a selfless person dedicated to helping others without any selfish motivation other than altruistic compassion for sentient beings. The acharya is a direct link between the spiritual aspirant and the Lord, and as such deserves the highest respect and adoration. One should surrender completely to such an acharya because it is only in a spirit of humility that one can learn anything from another. As long as pride and ego have control over the mind one can never absorb or assimilate and practice the teachings. With self-discipline obtained from the service of the acharya one becomes fit for the practice of the dharma.

It is important to note that the Advaitic concept of the acharya taking on the balance of the disciple's karma has no place in Srivaishnavism. In the philosophy of Advaita it is taught that there is no difference between the Guru and the disciple — they are one in essence — the difference is only imagined, but the Guru is more enlightened than the disciple. By initiating disciples the Guru takes on personal responsibility for their spiritual advancement. If the disciple succeeds the Guru is benefited, if the disciple fails the Guru is detrimented.

In Srivaishnavism the Guru and the disciple are separate entities united only in the service of the Divine. The Guru acts as an intermediary between the aspirant and God, the Guru links them together, the relationship is essentially between the aspirant and the Lord. The disciple surrenders to God through the Guru, but the surrender is not to the person of the Guru but to the Guru as the personification of the Grace of God. God himself accepts the aspirants and showers his Grace upon them and grants them Salvation. The Guru has no personal advantage or disadvantage in the spiritual progress of the disciple, nor should he ever think that is actually contributing to the emancipation of the disciple. Any such feelings on the part of an acharya are a violation of the three components of Surrender. .

Categories of acharyas

The acharyas are described as belonging to one of two categories;

1. *anuvrtti-prasanna-acharya* — those who have to be sought out and persuaded with much

perseverance to impart their knowledge. It is only after rigorous testing of the prospective disciples that they consent to teach. Most of the acharyas prior to Ramanuja were of this category.

2. *kripa-matra-prasanna-acharya* — these acharyas teach their disciples out of compassion for their plight as ignorant and lost Selves, and are constantly seeking an opportunity to impart their knowledge, and are willing to teach anyone who will but listen. Ramanuja and most of the acharyas who came after him are of this class.

The Reprehensible Delusions of Preceptorship

Pillai Lokacharya (13th century) has described in his work *Srivachana Bhushan* (308 – 310) the three reprehensible delusions of preceptorship which must be avoided by the acharya at all costs. These are:—

1. The delusions of ‘preceptorship’ — thinking of oneself as *the* preceptor — an acharya should think of himself as simply a *conduit* of the Lord’s Grace and never as a teacher of sacred lore, this awareness prevents the acharya from developing the egotistical notion of being a great and learned person and having custodianship of spiritual knowledge.
2. The delusions about the role of the disciple — thinking of the disciple as *one’s* own personal adherent — the disciple should rather be thought of as a *co-disciple* of the same param acharya. Thus the acharya avoids the potential for exploitation inherent in the relationship.
3. The delusions arising from the process of instruction are of four categories:
 - a. seeking to gain financially from the tuition fees.
 - b. the delusion that one is actually facilitating the liberation of the disciple.
 - c. the delusion that one is assisting the Lord in his salvific agenda.
 - d. seeking or expecting social companionship or service from disciples.

The obtaining of an Acharya.

In the wisdom tradition of the East it is axiomatic that the acharya will only come when the disciple is ready. In order to obtain such an acharya, the following 6 factors must be present in the aspirant:

1. Love of God
2. Freedom from animosity to any sentient being
3. Perpetual advancement towards the goal
4. Providential merit (good karma)
5. Frequent association with spiritually inclined people.
6. Divine Grace

When these factor are present then the acharya certainly appears in order to mediate the act of Surrender The acharya then delivers the teachings by means of the three wisdom tools.

The three Wisdom Tools.

1. *sravana* — listening attentively to the teaching. One must attend lectures and discourses and listen attentively to the teachings of the Acharyas. Fifteen minutes of attentive listening can be more

valuable than reading stacks of books!

2. *manana* — reflecting upon the doctrines. One must reflect at great length upon the teachings using reason and logic to understand them from all angles. Any teaching which one does not understand should immediately be clarified from the acharya, repeated questioning is the way to understanding and wisdom.

3. *nididhyasana* — meditation upon the teaching, assimilating it and making it part of one's life. This is the difference between knowledge and realisation. Knowing all the facts is not sufficient, one must *realise* and *apply* the teachings in every aspect of one's daily life. Knowledge without practice is useless and a burden, like a donkey carrying a load of sandal wood. The donkey can appreciate the weight but not the fragrance!

The great Law-giver Manu has said;

The one who uses reason & logic; which does not contradict the Veda, to investigate the teachings of the sages on Dharma — he alone and no one else truly knows. (Manu 12;06)

There should be no passive learning or blind acceptance of teachings and doctrines. In the Vedic tradition the student who constantly questions, inquires, argues logically and thinks deeply is the one who is praised. Ramanuja himself often differed in opinion from his teachers and debated with them on many issues. Learning is stressed above all else and the greatest gift is the gift of knowledge. Learning is the cause of brahminhood and even Manu says that a brahmin devoid of learning is not a brahmin.

Disciples — Shishyas

According to the Agama disciples are divided into four categories;

1. *samanya shishyas* — ordinary disciples who receive the five sacraments (pañca-samskara) and have suitable faith in the Lord and the acharya and render some sort of service when called upon to do so, but do not study the philosophy or doctrines of the faith — usually due to lack of ability to do so.
2. *putrakas* — spiritual aspirants who receive the sacraments and then apply themselves to the study of the philosophy and teachings of the acharyas and the Alvars. They usually remain with the acharya and are like his sons.
3. *sadhakas* — These are disciples that have undergone the Tantric initiation and are actively engaged in meditation and the worship of a particular deity. They are entitled to officiate at all kinds of ceremonies and rituals including temple worship.
4. *acharyas* — These are very advanced disciples who are qualified to teach and interpret the sacred literature and the mantras. They are the elders of the Sampradaya and are entitled to initiate others.

Characteristics of a Disciple (SVB 321)

The characteristics of a sincere and worthy disciple are as follows;—

- ❖ Desists from all aims other than spiritual practice and devotional service.
- ❖ Is eager to adopt spiritual practice and discipline.
- ❖ Feels oppressed by Samsara (worldly life) and is eager to be liberated from it.
- ❖ Is humble and respectful.
- ❖ Is free from envy.

The Principles of Discipleship

The general principles of discipline which all disciples should try to practice are as follows;—

They should:

- ❖ follow the way of the previous acharyas.
- ❖ not discuss the merits or demerits of others.
- ❖ take no interest whatsoever in assessing the defects and errors of others.
- ❖ constantly reflect upon their personal imperfections and shortcomings.
- ❖ do everything possible to remain free of confusion, and should apply themselves vigorously to further study.
- ❖ constantly be aware of and acknowledge the quality of the Lord's protection.
- ❖ never show disrespect to the acharya, to the sacred mantras or to the sacred icons.

The Disciplic Contract (SVB 326 – 346)

According to Pillai Lokacharya the guru and disciple must demonstrate a mutual beneficial and affectionate relationship.

The disciple should be committed to ensuring the physical and material wellbeing of the guru.

The guru should be committed to teaching, instructing and guiding the disciple in his/her spiritual practice and the unfolding of the inherent spiritual qualities which are — knowledge, firm resolve, universal compassion, good conduct and service.

The acharya should never display anger towards the disciples, the disciples should never offend the acharya.

Both acharya and disciple have the right to mutually reprimand each other at any time. But this criticism must be constructive and done in private – the faults of either should never be revealed in public to others.

The disciple should never give personal property to the guru neither should the guru request such property.

Attitude towards a Guru

Traditionally a guru is either a family guru or one can choose a guru.

Once chosen a guru should be treated with the utmost veneration and respect, and one is required to submit totally to the teaching and the transformative guidance of the guru.

But unfortunately this submissive dynamic can lead to excesses and exploitation by gurus — especially within the realm of spirituality.

All of these exploitative situations could be remedied by understanding the authentic Hindu cultural attitudes towards this venerable institution.

Before accepting and committing oneself to a guru one must first do some market research — only after you have satisfied yourself that the prospective guru is the genuine article and can deliver the product should you submit to the didactic process.

Firstly the guru should possess three major qualifications to be considered:

*Ajnana gahanaloka surya somagni murtaye
Dukha trayagni santapa tasmai sri murtaye namah*

I salute the guru who, in the work enveloped by the darkness of ignorance is the form of the sun, moon and fire.

Surya (Sun) — have knowledge and wisdom and the ability to disperse the darkness of ignorance and to enlighten.

Soma (Moon) — nurturing and protecting.

Agni (Fire)— the power to motivate and correct through disciplinary measures and to transmit the teachings and to transform the disciple.

Testing a Guru

1. The lineage.

The guru should belong to a recognised lineage (*sampradaya*) and be part of an authentic transmission (*parampara*). This can easily be done by “googling” the guru or simply by asking him (or her) what their lineage is or who their guru was. This question is a culturally valid question and one should not feel shy about doing so.

2. The level of knowledge of the guru.

This is difficult because to ascertain the level of knowledge one needs to have some grounding in the Dharma. Generally one should check if the guru encourages questions or not and if questions are answered satisfactorily.

3. The ability to teach and transmit.

A guru may have the knowledge and all the qualifications but be unable to teach effectively. The purpose of the guru-disciple relationship is to instruct, educate and transform the disciple (*shishya*) if the guru is technically unable to do this then there is no point to the relationship.

4. If the teacher “embodies” the teachings.

The guru must be an exemplar of the Dharma and must embody the teachings and be a good role-model. They should be teaching by example — this is the meaning of the term *acharya*.

5. The effect on disciples and followers.

One should observe the behaviour and inter-personal dynamic of the disciples and followers and note if they are in concord with the Dharma teachings delivered by the guru.

Likewise the disciple is also tested by the guru to ascertain whether he/she is a fit person to receive the transmission.

Initiation

Once the guru and disciple have past the test and been mutually accepted their relationship is formally confirmed through a rite of initiation or DIKSHA.

One should then engage proactively in the disciplic process which is described in the Gita:—

- ❖ *Pranipatena* — by submission and prostration
- ❖ *Pari-prashnena* — by intensive questioning and debate.
- ❖ *Sevaya* — by service or securing the material welfare of the guru.

The teaching itself.

The teaching itself should be submitted to scrutiny as well and in order for a spiritual teaching or ideology to be valid it must fulfil 3 conditions: —

1. *Satyam* — it must be intellectually satisfying and must be able to stand up to criticism and logical scrutiny.
2. *Sivam* — it must be universally beneficial, have an all-inclusive ethic and be directed at the well-being of all sentient creatures
3. *Sundaram* — it must have an aesthetic component — promoting all forms of beauty, music, art, architecture, and dance etc.

The outcome must be *Shanti* — personal as well as world peace.

The Authority of the Acharyas

Many Srivaishnavas resort to the “opinions” and “rulings” of a nebulous group “acharyas” as if they were, a united, congruous, and harmonious band of divine beings and like the Catholic Pope “infallible”. Yet we know that the “acharyas” were many – Ramanuja appointed 700 *simhasanadhispatis*. (We hear nothing about the 300 women teachers that he also appointed!). All these men (and women) were very much human beings with a disposition that is natural to the species. They often disagreed in their views and many learned acharyas wrote complex polemic works refuting each others arguments. Hence we have the classical Vadagalai/Tengalai divide and the 18 points of doctrinal dispute – which are still not resolved till this day! There is no Srivaishnava “pope” and no unitary body issuing “fatwas” – each and every acharya and matham is independent and can make up their own minds on doctrinal points and matters of interpretation. If you approach three acharyas today on any major issue you will probably have at least two opinions. (Please note that there is often also bitter rivalry between acharyas of the same faction!).

When such be the case, it is important to understand that the acharya is a guide and counsellor on the spiritual path — a spiritual coach, and the one that formally establishes our connection with Sriman Narayana — a connection which was never lost and is irrevocable, perpetual and natural – one is advised to choose a personal acharya and after testing him (or her) to ensure that what is taught is:—

- (a) in the spirit of Ramanuja’s teachings,
- (b) is reasonable and practicable and
- (c) benefits all beings

— one should then surrender to the guidance and teachings of such a person.

To invoke the tired phrase:— “our acharyas have said ” — is vague, general and unhelpful and ultimately a cop-out from actually using our intelligence.

Who is a Guru? The Traditional, Scriptural View

by Nitin Goel

The science of spirituality is all about knowing one's own self. However, this can never be known in any of the normal ways through which we gain knowledge of worldly subjects. To learn and experience this science, we need to be graced with the blessings of both - guru and God. There is nothing surprising in this. We all know that to qualify in any field of knowledge, we require the guidance of an experienced person who is already qualified in that particular field. Whether it is a doctor, a lawyer or a businessman, all follow this line of action only. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita:

"It is only one amongst thousands of people who strives for spiritual salvation. Even amongst such seekers, it is only the rare person who gets to know me correctly." (7.3)

This is God's own voice, which makes it clear that it is not easy to gain such a knowledge. Due to our deep-rooted ignorance, there is a wide gap between what we believe ourselves to be and what we actually are. Therefore, the guiding hand of a guru is both necessary and sufficient for progress on the spiritual path.

Some intelligent fools of today do not accept this, rather they oppose it. They are not correct. However intelligent a person may be, it is impossible for him to study the scriptures and experience their essence on his own. Therefore, even one who knows the scriptures should not search for the science of salvation (Brahma-jnana) independently. He should proceed to a qualified guru to receive the same.

The Chandogya Upanishad says:

'Only the knowledge received from a teacher (Acharya) leads one to the goal.' (4.9.3)

'The one who has a teacher will know the truth.' (6.14.2)

The alphabets making up the word guru itself signify its meaning. 'Gu' means the darkness of ignorance and 'ru' indicates the one who destroys; therefore, the one who removes our ignorance (about our true selves) is our guru.

The Qualities of a Guru:

What are the qualities in a guru which make us seek the science of salvation from him? How should we approach such a guru? It is the scriptures themselves which answer this question:

'With sacrificial wood in hands, one should approach a guru, who is both a 'Shrotriya' and 'Brahmanishtha'. (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12)

Here the first adjective describing an ideal guru is '*Shrotriya*'. It means a person who has not only studied, but also lives and acts according to the scriptures (Shruti). '*Brahmanishtha*' means one whose mind is always fixed on the Supreme God (Brahman). There are many who possess only one of these qualities. However, the ideal guru is one who has both; i.e., these two qualities need to be present together in a person for him to qualify as a guru. Such a teacher knows the traditional meaning of the scriptures and therefore does not interpret them according to his own free will. Due to his following the unbroken tradition of our ancient sages, there is no contradiction in his teachings. From his explanations the students not only get answers to all their queries - asked or unasked, but their doubts too get dissolved. If the guru is not a Brahmanishtha, then his discourses are but mere rote, like that of a parrot. Each student harbors different queries and doubts depending on his/her background and

Samskaras. Suitable answers to such a variety of questions can come only from the reservoir of experience, not from books. Therefore, it is said in the Gita:

'Knowledge will be given to you by those who are knowledgeable and have seen the Truth.' (4.34)

Here knowledgeable means one having the knowledge of the scriptures. Seer of Truth (*Tattva-Darshi*) means one who has realized the 'Truth' as it actually is. It is only the teachings of such a teacher that can take one to the desired goal and not that of others.

Such a self-satisfied guru is always happy and content. In the Chandogya Upanishad such a person is addressed as '*Saumya*'. *Saumya* means calm and soothing like the moon (Soma). Not only this, such a guru is so compassionate that he reveals all he knows to his deserving students without keeping anything secret. The knower of God, such a guru is but God himself. Therefore we need to have complete faith in him. In fact, the scriptures also emphasize that it is the duty of such a guru to impart knowledge to his deserving students:

'To the peaceful student who has won over his senses, the wise guru should disclose the essential knowledge which will reveal the Supreme God.' (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.13)

The Great Shankaracharya says:

'A knowledgeable guru should definitely impart knowledge to the worthy pupil who has approached him in the correct manner.' (Commentary on the Prashna Upanishad 6.1)

How to Obtain and Serve a Guru:

The primary reason why we are unable to obtain a guru like this is our inability to understand that there is no other path to Moksha than the one delineated in the scriptures. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad says: 'There is no other path to liberation' (3.8). Only the one free from this delusion is a fit vehicle for obtaining a guru through the grace of God. Indeed, obtaining a guru is the clearest manifestation of God's grace in our life.

The scriptures inform us how we have to serve and venerate the guru. We should offer him the wood used in Vedic Sacrifices (*samidha*). This wood is a representative of karma. The one searching for Moksha recognizes that performing karma does not serve any purpose for him. He wants to receive the fire of knowledge from his guru, which will burn down all his karma, symbolized by the wood. This is why he carries to the guru this piece of wood. Lord Krishna says:—

"Like fire consumes wood, so does the fire of knowledge burn down all karma."
(Bhagavad Gita 4.37)

The Puranas and histories (Itihasa) are full of instructions informing us how we have to act towards the guru with fear, devotion and humility. Not only that, the Gita also tells us how to approach our guru for removing our doubts:

"You should gain knowledge by prostrating before your guru, asking sincere questions for clearing your doubts, and by serving him" (Bhagavad Gita 4.34).

The Manu Smriti elaborates on the method of prostrating before the guru:

The guru's feet should be touched with hands crossed, i.e., the right hand should touch the right leg and the left hand should touch the left (2.72).

Here prostration indicates complete surrender on part of the seeker. Such an act is known as

Dandavat in Sanskrit. Like a stick which falls flat on the ground in the absence of a support, we too stand nowhere without the guru's support.

Our questions too reflect our humility. Even after this, for the successful culmination of the knowledge obtained from the guru, it is imperative that we serve him. In fact, prostration and questioning both may be feigned, however, the service we are able to offer to our guru is the sincerest reflection of the genuineness of our commitment.

Further, fundamental to obtaining knowledge from the guru is our faith, called in Sanskrit as 'Shraddha'. Shraddha means having complete faith in the Word - both of the scriptures and of the guru. The word Shraddha is made up of two constituents - 'Shrad' means truth, and 'Dha' means bearing. Thus, the necessary (and sufficient) condition for bearing the truth is Shraddha. The Gita too says:

'Shraddhavan labhate jnanam - Only the person of faith can gain knowledge.' (4.39)

A Warning:

Consider for a moment that a seeker accepts an undeserving guru by mistake. When he slowly comes to know that his guru, even though he is a knower of the scriptures, is neither preaching nor living according to them, then the student should leave that guru immediately without fear. The Mahabharata says clearly:

'The one who doesn't know what is right and what is wrong, and is leading an unrighteous life, that person is to be discarded, even though he may be a guru.' (Shanti Parva 5.77)

References and Further Reading:

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