

The Guru/Disciple Relationship

By Reverend Jaganath Carrera

The Guru/Disciple Relationship

The Guru has been a cornerstone of the yogic tradition for at least seven thousand years. But even with the current popularity of Yoga, the term Guru, and the Guru/disciple relationship is misunderstood, leading some to think it is unnecessary or even harmful.

Simply put, the Guru/disciple relationship is the master/apprentice relationship applied to spirituality. It is well known that the best way to learn anything is from someone who has mastered the theory and practice of that subject. We wouldn't trust self-taught surgeons whose education was limited to books. We demand that they have studied and apprenticed with skilled, experienced physicians, who oversaw and tested every step of their development. Apprenticeship in spirituality is particularly vital, especially as the student progresses.

If your interest is simply to learn basic Hatha Yoga practices and meditation, a Guru is not necessary. The immediate goals of better health and fitness, and a clearer, more focused mind don't require it. You could learn from a good teacher, CDs, DVDs, or from books. The problem is that the roots of spiritual ignorance usually remain unchallenged and still cause havoc in our lives. Even scriptures cannot provide the required guidance, support, and course corrections we need to reach spiritual maturity - Self-realization.

The foundation of Yoga is not about gaining information or learning practices, but about transformation and transcendence. The basic ignorance of our True Nature (the Absolute or God within) needs to be removed. This can only happen when the limitations of ego are overcome. Trying to do this alone is like trying to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. We lack the experience to be able to identify subtle obstacles and the

objectivity to ascend to the highest levels of insight. The Guru is the one who removes (*ru*) the darkness (*gu*) of ignorance.

That's why we can say that the Guru is not just a teacher – even a great and wise teacher. The Guru can also be that, but in reality, the Guru/disciple relationship is not the same as the teacher student relationship. The difference lies in the understanding and attitude of a disciple.

The Guru/disciple relationship is based on the faith and willingness of the disciple to follow the Guru's guidance and teachings. Simply put, the one in whom you have faith, who awakens in you the long forgotten memory of your True Nature, who inspires you to believe in the reality of moving beyond suffering, who teaches the intricacies of the spiritual path, and who guides, supports, cajoles, challenges, and corrects you, is the Guru.

*The Guru is verily a link between the individual and the Immortal.
Sri Swami Sivananda*

How To Recognize the Guru

*When the student is ready, the teacher appears.
Traditional saying from Hinduism and Buddhism*

The Guru is not the body, not the mind, not even the intellect. It is the Self, or God, that is the Guru. As such, the Guru exists within us all. Why then should it be necessary to have someone else show us the way?

The fire hidden within a stick manifests when it is rubbed against another stick. Similarly, the Truth within can only be called forth by another human being. Wisdom, like light passing from a lit candle to an unlit one, passes freely from one human being to another.

Ultimately, it is the Guru within you that recognizes and chooses the Guru outside. The path to the Guru/disciple relationship is one in which the head and the heart should agree.

The Head

- The Guru should be someone well versed in the texts, teachings, and practices of the path.
- It is very helpful if the Guru is part of a lineage of Gurus. If the Guru's Guru is someone well respected, you are more likely to be with one who has been trained and has experienced what is needful in a Guru.
- Watch how the Guru acts. Do his or her words and actions conform to what is accepted by your path?

The Heart

- You feel uplifted in her or his presence.
- You get a sense of something transcendent in, around, or through the Guru.
- Their teachings resonate strongly in you and make greater sense than ever before.
- A feeling that somehow, all is well while you are in your Guru's presence.
- The words and experience of being with the Guru leaves an impression that may last for days.

All this can happen not only with a Guru who is still physically alive, but with one that has passed on. Students can encounter their Guru through books, videos, audios, and through senior disciples.

The Guru/disciple relationship can be a "love at first sight" situation. More often, it takes time. The student needs to become familiar with the teacher, the teachings, and the community of disciples. This may take days, weeks, months, or years.

In the end, the head should approve of the teachings, while the heart is drawn to the teacher.

The Highest Teaching

The Guru/disciple relationship involves more than just study and practice. The most powerful, transformative teachings are too subtle for words. They are conveyed through a deep link formed between the Guru and the disciple through the faith of the disciple. It is primarily that link that distinguishes the Guru/disciple relationship from the teacher/student relationship. This means that the essence of spirituality - its beauty, power, and revelations - is conveyed in a process something like osmosis.

Authentic Yoga is never a do it yourself enterprise. The master imparts the inner teachings of spirituality that can never be explained fully or accurately in words or printed books.

Georg Feurstein, The Yoga Tradition

Initiation

The minute you accept someone as your Guru, you have decided to commit yourself to his or her teaching. That is why only those that are very, very, serious, very interested; those who know the benefit of it, should take initiation.

Sri Swami Satchidananda

Initiation is the formal entry into the Guru/disciple relationship. It marks the beginning of a deep and powerful relationship that greatly accelerates spiritual growth.

In most yogic initiation traditions, disciples receive a mantra to repeat as a central part of their daily practices. Repetition of a mantra tunes the mind to the Divine wavelength and brings clarity,

joy, and peace. Yet, there is more to initiation than receiving a mantra.

Much of what the teacher imparts to the disciple falls under the category of spiritual transmission. Such transmission, in which the Guru literally empowers the student through transference of “energy” or “consciousness” (corresponding to the “Holy Spirit” of Christian baptism), is the fulcrum of the initiatory process of Yoga. By means of it, the practitioner is blessed in his or her struggle for transcendental realization.
Georg Feurstein, The Yoga Tradition

At initiation, disciples receive the transmission of spiritual energy from the Guru to help them on their path. It's like a fully charged battery giving current to a weaker one. This transmission of energy is the core of initiation.

Once students receive this energy, they cultivate the charge within by repeating the mantra and following the teachings to the best of their ability.

But, the disciples' life does not consist only of following instructions. Disciples' responsibilities include asking questions about life and the Self; about ignorance, pain, and the way out of suffering. This questioning is an essential part of the process necessary to overcome ignorance.

How The Disciple is Greater Than the Guru

The Guru/disciple relationship relies more on the faith of the disciple than the skills of the Guru. There is a story in the great spiritual epic, the *Mahabharata*, of a young man named Ekalavya. The great Guru, Drona, refused to accept him as a disciple. Undeterred, Ekalavya fashioned a clay image of Drona. Everyday, he would sit in front of the clay image to meditate on his Guru. In

this way, without any physical contact with Drona, Ekalavya learned and mastered all that Drona could teach. So, who is greater, the Guru or the disciple?

If you seek enlightenment from those who have realized the truth, prostrate before them, question them, and serve them. Only then are you open to receive the teachings of sacred knowledge.

Bhagavad Gita, 4.34

Potential Pitfalls.

The Guru/disciple relationship can degenerate into personality worship. This may happen due to our need to find certainty and to love and be loved unconditionally, or through the influence of less than scrupulous, but charismatic Gurus.

But the most serious snare is that disciples may forget that they, just like their Guru, are in essence, Divine. They need to remind themselves of this truth daily. A true Guru will also take every opportunity to hold a 'mirror' up to their disciples to say, "What you are seeing here in me, *is your own Self.*"

These same pitfalls also clearly speak of the tremendous power in the Guru/disciple relationship. It wields the power of transformation, the ability to clean our egos of selfishness and the limitations of ignorance.

The Guru is the ladder that leads us to the rooftop. Once there, we let go of the ladder and get on with the work that needs to be done. The Guru is also like the mama bird that nudges its offspring out of the nest when it is time for them to fly.

The Guru/disciple relationship is the soft, transforming kiss of Truth that sets the soul free.

Reverend Jaganath

The Guru in Other Faith Traditions

The master/disciple relationship is universal. Thousands of years of time-honored experience in virtually every faith tradition have proven the efficacy of spiritual experience being passed from one human being to another. Following are some teachings from a few of the world's great faiths that illustrate this.

Hinduism

Renunciation of the objects of the senses, seeing of Reality, and samadhi are difficult to obtain without the compassion of a true Guru.

Hatha Yoga Pradeepika

To know the Eternal, let the seeker humbly approach a Guru devoted to Brahman and well-versed in the scriptures. To a disciple who approaches reverently, who is tranquil and self-controlled, the wise teacher gives, faithfully and without holding back, that knowledge by which is known the truly existing, the changeless Self.

Mundaka Upandishad

Buddhism

In Buddhism, the disciple regards the Guru as the embodiment of Buddha, or a Bodhisattva, and shows devotion and great appreciation toward the Guru as such.

To learn what qualities teachers have, we can examine their behavior, their understanding of Dharma, and how they treat their students.

Thubten Chodron

Christianity

While we could say that Lord Jesus is the Guru of all Christians, priests, ministers, and other spiritually mature individuals were expected to guide and support the faithful – to serve as spiritual directors, stand-ins for Lord Jesus. The following quote, although meant for monastics, could apply to anyone regarded as a spiritual director.

An Abbott . . . is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery,

The Rule of St. Benedict

Judaism

Tzaddikim are a vehicle of the Divine.

Rashi Bereishis 17:22

A *tzaddik* (a righteous person) is someone who has conquered pride, the temptations of power, and oppression.

If a man sanctifies himself by fulfilling the commandments...then he becomes a sanctuary, and G-d is within him literally.

Nefesh Hachaim 1:4

Sufism

Sufism is the mystic branch of Islam.

The transmission of the esoteric school of Sufism is passed on from heart to heart, from teacher to student, and can only be fully received through the profound connection that exists between two human hearts that are deeply attuned.

Pir Zia Inayat Khan

Taoism

*Thus the Sage, in his silent and subtle way,
Is always good at saving people,
And thereby abandons no one.*

*This is called, "Passing the light."
Tao Te Ching*

Sikhism

*The light of a lamp that lights another does not decrease. Similarly
a spiritual leader and his disciple become equal, so says
Guru Nanak.*

Native American

*We gather our minds to greet and thank the enlightened Teachers
who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how
to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to
live as people. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to
these caring Teachers.*

Now our minds are one.

May you have the blessings of the Guru with you always. May that grace speed you to the ultimate aim of spiritual life: to experience the Self.