
Sahaj Marg Study Group

Eastern Heart Western Mind

Blending Knowledge and Love, by Clark Powell

Set 5, Handout 1 (This article first appeared in a magazine called YOGA INTERNATIONAL, March/April, 1996)

Despite obvious differences in ritual and terminology, the great spiritual traditions of the world appear to agree on one essential point -- the seeker of ultimate Reality should obtain the services of a living master, zaddick, sheik, roshi, elder, lama, or guru. Anyone who takes the trouble to study the esoteric wisdom paths from primal or shamanistic cultures to the major world religions cannot fail to be struck by this repeated admonition: "Scriptures can take you only so far-- you must find a master!"

But is this relevant today, especially in the democratic, information-rich society of the West? Why can't we realize God or Self on our own, without involving a human guide or intermediary in this most intimate process? And how would we find such a guru anyway? How would we recognize that person as an authentic master? Are there requirements or credentials we can look for in a master, regardless of the tradition he or she represents?

Almost everyone who enters the spiritual arena with a sincere and adventurous heart eventually asks questions like these. They are not just modern issues but are basic and perennial concerns that have been raised since pre-history. Yet for some of us struggling to integrate the ancient guru-centric traditions of the East into our own time and far-different world, these have become critical and often painful questions. Indeed, some of these private struggles are now legal issues, involving not only the outrage of individuals, but the heartbreak of whole communities.

This article will focus on the first question: Is the guru-disciple tradition valid for a modern Westerner, or is it a defunct and outmoded model, too susceptible to abuse by both charlatan "gurus" on one hand and treacherous "disciples" on the other? In the future, I will try to focus on the character and characteristics of the authentic guru as well as the qualified disciple, and talk about ways we might find such a teacher for ourselves, should we feel so inclined.

Because the relation between guru and each disciple is intimate and unique and because yoga has always emphasized direct experience over abstract theorizing, I hope the reader will understand why I must include as an example of the guru-disciple tradition the ongoing relationship I have with my own guru, Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, the third in the lineage of the masters of the Raja Yoga system known as Sahaj Marg, or Natural Path. I feel that speaking of my own experience is first a matter of journalistic integrity in disclosing my own biases, and second, that my story is probably similar to that of other Westerners with other gurus, and so may serve as a kind of personal illustration of the concepts under discussion.

I am not recommending my practice or my guru over others that may be equally or even more suitable for particular readers, or suggesting that the guru path is the only way to advance spiritually. It is not. Nor is it for everyone at every stage in their spiritual journey. But at least we might have some idea of what the guru-disciple tradition is actually about so that we can decide for ourselves.

WHAT THE GURU IS NOT

Curiously enough, the idea of benefiting from a guru is repugnant to many Americans. The "curiously enough" is inserted because, first of all, the Christian gospels present a perfect example of the guru-disciple tradition. No matter how it is interpreted by fundamentalist zealots, the New Testament is no less than a disquisition on the role of the guru. Far from being at odds with the other great traditions of the East, Western Christianity is in harmony with Sufism, Hinduism and Buddhism regarding the role of the teacher-exemplar.

Second, it is curious that we Westerners balk at trusting a guru with our spiritual welfare when we feel no such reluctance in placing our physical well-being in the hands of other human beings almost every day. The necessity of human interdependence is a fact of everyday life. Most of us eat food grown by others, wear clothes fabricated by others, and use computers and telephones we could never have invented and whose workings we hardly understand. When we board an airplane we willingly trust our lives to a pilot we have never seen; we trust a surgeon to open our bodies under anesthesia; even when we get in a car, we must trust the driving skills of other motorists. Why then do we resist the idea of trusting an adept, who is after all an expert coach or trainer in spirituality?

Already I can hear the familiar objection: Yes, but what about the fake gurus? It is true that charlatans and psychotics often attract large followings who honestly consider them to be gurus. It is also possible for genuine masters to make simple mistakes, or, more seriously, to devolve or backslide. This is no less true today than it has been for centuries—it has always been part of the dance, and it will doubtless continue in the future. But the existence of failed or counterfeit gurus does not mean that the real article isn't out there somewhere for these tragic figures to imitate, since counterfeits are impossible without genuine originals. That authentic Rembrandts exist is not negated by the forged copies that surface; indeed, his mastery is confirmed by the counterfeits—for what fool would try to pass off a forged copy of something that was of no value, or never existed in reality? It would be like making counterfeits of pennies or of 25-dollar bills. Dismissing all gurus because of false teachers or deluded cults may be comforting for us, since it allows us to remain in our cynical easy-chairs and do nothing about our own spiritual journey, but it is a bit too simplistic to dismiss the possibility that living gurus exist based on the behavior of a few sensationalized poseurs. This is like refusing to accept money because there may be forged notes floating around somewhere.

Another misunderstanding of the guru-disciple tradition lies in the American tendency to fashion the spiritual domain into our notion of a democracy, where every individual is king and every man a priest. But even the most cursory examination reveals that men and women are at many levels of enlightenment. This is also a mistaken view of the proper relation between the guru and chela, or student, and smacks of narcissism when it derives from a desire to approach God on our own terms with our egos intact, or even inflated by our imagined accomplishments. "I did it my way" may be fine for Frank Sinatra, but the woman or man of God understands the old proverb: "There is not room for two in one cotóif God is to come into your heart, you must be absent."

In short, few Westerners appreciate what the guru-disciple tradition really involves. Many of us have accepted as a substitute for this understanding a kind of scandal-sheet media mentality. We imagine some phony imperious leader who is suspiciously like ourselves in his desire for admiration and sex and money. Furthermore, this guy, who is invested with all our own projected weaknesses, has duped a throng of gullible saps into believing him and obeying his every wish, just as the newspapers and newscasts reassure us whenever they can find such an example. Others among us secretly harbor a kind of comic-book expectation that our guru will be an infallible super-hero with miraculous powers of clairvoyance and other flashy yogic siddhis. Unfortunately, even those of us who have taken the trouble to gain direct experience with a guru are often influenced by these popular misconceptions. In the mind's continuing battle between defensive cynicism on one hand and naive romanticism on the other, the reality of the guru before us is often difficult to locate.

WHAT THE GURU IS

Despite these difficulties, many in the West are beginning to see that the ancient guru-disciple tradition of the East is actually one of mutual love and respect between two very human beings. It need not be "transformed" to suit Western tastes, because the Eastern tradition has always been a reciprocal relationship between the master and heart-child, a relationship as often filled with fun and laughter as with difficulty and release. The tradition of the guru, at least as I have experienced it, is certainly is not the culture-bound, patriarchal lord-and-serf affair that is currently being portrayed in some New Age circles.

Perhaps I've simply been fortunate in my selection, but issues of power and authority do not arise between my Master and me any more than they would between a grandfather and his grandchild. We simply enjoy being together. Along with many in the West, I am coming to realize that no experience is more wonderful or more endlessly fascinating than having a lifelong relationship with a worthy guru. It is a relationship which can expand to fill the entire universe, a mystery which embraces all other possible human relationshipsómother and infant, father and son, friend and companion, mentor and student, lover and beloved. Some of us are beginning to understand that knowing a Guru may be

the greatest delight and the most fortunate experience that can come to a human being.

My master, whom we call simply Chariji, loves to joke and spin our unspoken biases. For example, once when I walked into his kitchen he greeted me this way: "Hello, boss!" Seeing that I was somewhat startled by this, he added, "Oh Clark, you are like most people. You don't want to have a boss, do you? But you see, I want more and more bosses, for that would mean more people are accepting my services." Chariji is very clear that a guru must be one who is ever ready to serve, and should have absolutely no ideas of pride or arrogance, for as he was told by his own guru, "At the outset I cannot say that I am one of the best masters, but your experience will tell that I am one of the best servants."

That being the case, I once suggested to Chariji that the word "master" is not a good one to use since it seems to get Americans so riled up, and that maybe the word "servant" should be used instead. He thought a moment, and said, "No, it would not be appropriate. In India, when we say 'Master,' the word does not imply a relationship, you know, master and slave. 'Master' really means only 'one who has mastered himself.'" And to this we might add a second quality: "One with the power to make others like himself."

Though one's relation with a true guru is not hierarchical at least not from the viewpoint of the guru, who sees the Divine in all neither is it some casual, buddy-buddy kind of thing. Human as the guru may be, he or she is also an extraordinary being whose divine nature must also be reckoned with. Therefore, surrender and obedience have always played a central role in the life of the disciple. Even so, Ram Chandra of Shahjahanpur, who is my own master's guru (he was known as "Babuji" since he worked as a clerk or babu), once told Chari that even when a master gives an order, the disciple must always verify it in his heart before acting, for whether he obeys his guru or not, the disciple remains responsible for his own choices and actions. In the same vein, Babuji's master, Shri Ram Chandra of Fatehgarh (or Lalaji, as he was known affectionately) made the observation that three tests may be applied to a given decision or action: If the Scriptures, the guru, and one's heart agree, then the action is correct. One day I asked Chariji, "But what if the Scriptures and the external guru say one thing, and my heart says another?" Chariji's answer was clear: "Then you must follow your heart." So I asked him if he had ever disobeyed his own Master. "I disagreed with Babuji many times," he chuckled, "but I never disobeyed him."

Thus, obedience in the tradition of Sahaj Marg becomes an intuitive art, since external discipline is never imposed. No Sahaj Marg master issues orders; instead, he humbly makes requests or offers suggestions to his "associates," which was Babuji's term for most Sahaj Marg practitioners, and even then, those associates must listen closely to detect these delicate hints. True gurus understand the difficulties of obedience, possibly because they were disciples themselves. As Paramhansa Yogananda noted: "No disciple is forced to obey his guru. Freedom to accept or reject is one of the first laws of spiritual life. Any guru who demanded mindless obedience from his disciples would attract only

mindless disciples. He would be given a wide berth by strong-willed devotees, who alone are fit for the path to God-realization."

But recognizing the divinity of our guru does not mean that we must ignore the fact that the guru is also human. Can a master make mistakes? Of course! "The master may or may not be right, but the Truth is always right," Chariji once wrote me cryptically in a letter when I had strongly disagreed with some views he had expressed. Babuji used to joke that this is what made a master greater than God, for God is not able to make mistakes! (It may also be one explanation for one of Babuji's more mysterious remarks: "God is limited, but the Master is unlimited.")

Does a Master grow and change? Naturally! In Chari's view we should beware of any system headed by a "perfect" guru, because then the whole structure beneath that guru is static, like a frozen pyramid. Because Sahaj Marg considers the Goal to be Infinite, it is said to be dynamic system in which even the Masters are still "swimming toward the Center."

Balancing discriminating wisdom with great devotion, jnana with bhakti, is a rare talent, but in the great disciples one always finds that these two qualities are blended and inseparable. Babuji liked to describe the ideal disciple as having "a Western mind and an Eastern heart." The way to God is not for "spiritual weaklings," as Yogananda liked to point out, yet such strong-minded, open-hearted disciples are rare not only in the West, but also in the East. For this reason, Lalaji used to say, "I require lions, not sheep. But I have admitted even sheep in my satsangh for courtesy's sake." And Babuji, who said he would rather have one lion than ten-thousand sheep, explained his preference with another statement: "I have not come to make disciples. I have come to make masters."

THE WAY HOME

Even granted that authentic gurus do exist, questions still remain, including these two: Is a guru really necessary these days? Can't we just go to the Source directly?

The answer to both questions, frankly, is "yes." We can indeed go to the Source directly, without any assistance from a fellow human being, and we are welcome to try whenever we like. Yet history has shown that very few are born with the capacity to realize the Ultimate in one lifetime without any assistance. These may be what the Buddhists call the Tathagatas, which means literally "thus come," and the Hindus call Avatars, or divine incarnations, who are born not as we are, because of the dictates of our karma, but because they are sent into the world to instruct and to uphold the dharma. But one must remember that even the great sages and saviors often required a human touch to awaken them or at least to consecrate them to their Work. Buddha's enlightenment under the Bo tree had been prepared by all his efforts with the Brahmins and the ascetics; Ramakrishna's awakening was sparked by Totapuri; Jelaluddin Rumi's by Shems-i-Tabriz. We have no record of the training of Jesus, but the role of John the Baptist in inaugurating Christ to His work has been documented.

Those who are more or less satisfied with their lives generally view an interest in gurus and spiritual matters as inexplicable or even downright weird. For most people, the question of needing a guru never even surfaces, simply because very few venture beyond the comfortable neighborhood of the particular religion they were born into by an accident of geography. Most of us can get by with the local priests or rabbis or mullahs, or with our own instincts, for that matter.

Clearly, we need no guide to show us around our own front yard, but if we wish to climb the Himalayas, it is wise to seek out a sherpa. The spiritual seeker is an adventurer who must question the assumptions of conventional morality or religion, which explains why such souls have traditionally been subjected to tormenting doubt, deep despair, and serious trouble. Because if you want to be honest about it, once we dare to depart the base camps of our everyday world, we soon discover that we're ascending a route that we can't comprehend toward a summit we're not sure even exists.

At this juncture, those who reject the idea that they can benefit from a guru often don't appreciate the magnitude of the inner mountain which stands between them and the Ultimate. Eventually, we may come to understand that the Path is filled with incredible difficulties and blind alleys of maya and ego, and why it is said that hundreds of lifetimes can be spent exploring what turns out to be a dead end. We can easily mistake the crests of foothills for the final summits of spirituality, and never realize we have stopped far short of our destination. The trek is often tedious and seemingly endless, and an experienced guru serves as both a comfort and a goad to keep us moving on till we have left even the mountain itself, and come to a place where there are no more valleys, no summits, no path, no master, and no disciple.

Once we find this out for ourselves, we can see that it may not be childish dependency but mature judgment that leads some to seek the guidance of a master. For as the old proverb says, "If you wish to know the Way, find the one who travels up and down upon it."

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