

In Search Of The Highest Truth

Adventures in Yoga Philosophy

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CHAPTER 10

Gurus and Teachers

Among the many elements of traditional yoga that have been difficult for modern Western practitioners to assimilate, the *guru*-disciple relationship has proven to be one of the most challenging and contentious – so much so that calls from the collective voice of modern yoga to banish the institution of *guru* once and for all are common. This is understandable: in the past few years many modern yoga “*gurus*,” and some presumably traditional ones, have betrayed the trust of those who placed their faith in them. The revelations of abuse and duplicity have been sufficiently flagrant and injurious as to inspire the assumption that anyone who takes the seat of the *guru* does so with ulterior motives.

We have high standards for *gurus* but low expectations of people: we think a “real” *guru* must be a flawless embodiment of supra-conscious morality and that, since no one is really capable of such perfection, there is no such thing as a “real” *guru*. The consistent failure of self-styled *gurus* to live up to the standard described by yoga tradition consistently transforms the earnest idealism of earnest practitioners into dejected cynicism.¹ The persistence of human frailty, even in the face of good-faith efforts at spiritual progress, to say nothing of conspicuously ego-driven posturing, compel us to think that there has actually never been any such thing as a “real” *guru*. Resistance to the very idea of *guru* is thus seen as the only way to ensure that sincere aspirants won’t get ripped-off by smooth-talking Svengalis offering rose-colored promises in exchange for blind obedience.

With such reasonable doubts in mind, critical thinking about the place of *guru*-disciple relationships in modern yoga should be encouraged. In considering the question, the first issue that needs to be addressed is one of criteria: what qualifications must one have in order to take the seat of the *guru*?

Like so many Sanskrit words from the lexis of yoga that have been appropriated by Western culture, the word *guru* has been uprooted from its original context. A literal meaning of *guru* is “heavy,” alluding to one who carries and delivers the weight of knowledge. We should therefore ask, “What kind of knowledge is the *guru* heavy with?”

In the context of traditional yoga, the *guru* is the carrier and the embodiment of transcendental knowledge, a vessel of both theoretical and experiential knowledge whose heart is free from ulterior motives born of material desires. Freedom from material

¹ See Bg, 2.55-58, among others.

desires or, at the very least, significant progress in the direction of such freedom, is the essential characteristic to look for in a *guru*.

The second question is one of authorization: by whose authority does one become a *guru*? In traditional yoga there is no such thing as self-authorization: a *guru*, upon meeting standards set by his or her *guru*, accepts disciples on the authority of his or her own *guru*. The authority of a *guru* is thus grounded in their position as a disciple of a *guru* who, in turn, is connected to a legitimate source of transcendental knowledge like a link in a chain. The Sanskrit term for this system of “disciplic succession” is *paramparā*, meaning “one after the other.”

Simply put, a *guru* is one who, by the grace of his or her own *guru*, has seen the Truth, understands it, accepts it, lives by it, and has the ability to guide a disciple toward an emulation of the *guru*’s realization. Characterized by dispassion, tranquility, and generosity, the *guru*’s instructions and prescriptions are meant to enable disciples to experience the Truth for themselves.

This, of course, is very different from a materialistic “*guru*” who, compelled by ulterior motives and guided by the ethics of opportunism, becomes preoccupied with the prospect of making money from and/or having inappropriate relationships with their followers.

The problem, however, is not the traditional conception of *guru*: it is the modern conception of yoga, which puts the *guru* shoe on the wrong foot and then blames the shoe.

Part of the problem is language: in the course of transplanting yoga’s spiritual culture into Western secular culture, a few things have been lost in translation. Among

them are the difference between a *guru* and a teacher. Subsequently, the difference between a student and a disciple has been lost as well. As a result, issues have been framed as *guru*-student relationships. The conflation of *guru*-disciple and teacher-student relationships has only amplified the confusion about the nature of these relationships.

A *guru* is a teacher, qualified as aforementioned, who accepts disciples based on the disciples' qualifications, such as sincerity, humility, determination, and willingness to accept the discipline of the *guru*'s prescribed practice. A disciple is one who has these requisite qualities. A *guru* does not accept disciples based on their ability to pay for services rendered. The relationship is a personal one that lasts forever.

By contrast, a teacher-student relationship in modern yoga is primarily a business relationship that ends when the transaction is balanced out: the student pays the teacher, the teacher teaches the student in proportion to the amount paid. This doesn't preclude the possibility, or even likelihood, that a deeper relationship between teachers and students will develop; they do all the time. Good teachers are characteristically generous, offering students time and energy above and beyond what they are compensated for, and good students become personally invested in their teachers.

Just the same, a teacher-student relationship is fundamentally a professional relationship until it becomes something more, in which case the character of the relationship fundamentally changes from professional to personal. The question is whether that personal relationship will evolve into a mutually beneficial one or an exploitative one.

Paradoxically, the most ancient texts of yoga describe a mystical element in the *guru*-disciple relationship that, upon close inspection, illuminates a practical approach to vetting candidates on both sides of the *guru*-disciple relationship:

yasya deve parā bhaktir - yathā deve tathā gurau /
tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ - prakāśante mahātmanaḥ //

“The true significance of these scriptures is revealed to those great souls who are devoted in equal measure to both the Supreme Lord and to their *guru*.”

~ Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.23

At first glance this may look like the problem – blind faith – rather than the solution. A little unpacking is required in order for the value and relevance of this passage to be understood. This particular *Upaniṣad* is a treatise on perception of the truth through purified senses. The proposition is that the *guru* is qualified as an emissary of the Supreme Lord (or the Highest Truth) by virtue of having mastered his or her senses. Control of the senses is the key to controlling the reservoir of the senses: the mind. Control of the mind is the mandatory pre-requisite for correct perception. With correct perception one sees the true nature of reality and one’s actual position as a part of reality. One who sees the Truth has the ability to act as a transparent medium through which others can see the same Truth. Such a person is a qualified *guru* and is thus accorded the same devotion as the Absolute Truth they reveal.

Yoga is a practical science that bestows direct perception of spiritual reality on the practitioner. In order to perceive the spiritual nature of reality, the instruments of perception (the senses) have to be purified. Restraining the impulse to pursue the

gratification of the material senses is the means by which purification of the senses takes place. Conversely, the pursuit of self-centered material desires reinforces misperception (*avidyā*). Hence, in the ancient Vedic tradition, yoga begins with ethical imperatives and purificatory observances – *yamā* and *niyamā* – that require restraining the senses from the pursuit of material desires. The reason for ethical restrictions and purificatory practices is not just a matter of morality; it's a matter of gaining access to the ultimate scope of potential knowledge.

A qualified disciple is therefore one who is prepared to accept a purificatory discipline prescribed by a *guru* who has mastered such a discipline. Such an aspirant is characterized by humility, a sincere desire to understand the truth, a receptive attitude toward instruction, and the willingness to offer service to their *guru*. Correspondingly, a qualified *guru* is characterized by humility, compassion, purity, knowledge, tolerance, detachment, and self-control. When the *guru* and the disciple are both qualified, the transmission of transcendental knowledge from *guru* to disciple is possible, and the likelihood of misplaced faith on the part of the disciple is minimized along with the potential for abuse on the part of the *guru*.