
Spiritual Insight through Spiritual Guide: The Hindu Perspective

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Abstract

The human quest for spirituality has ever been there since the world was created. People have sought to know the eternal and experience the enlightenment. Humans have ever longed to dissolve with the divine. This spiritual goal has been achieved around the world. The spiritual guides have ever helped seekers achieve their goal. The mystics guided through the sacred texts and their writings. The four major eras of the Vedic, the classical, the Bhakti and the modern period have acknowledged that the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is the foundation of spiritual knowledge. When the seekers are initiated by their master, form a bond and meditate incessantly with love, it is with the grace of their master that they are able to experience the Eternal Reality. By obeying the instructions of the master, the disciple can grow spiritually. Hinduism is grounded in the religious, moral and spiritual thoughts of saints of different eras. Their thoughts all together have been similar on the spiritual principles. Hindus have always accepted the idea of turning to a spiritual master or *guru* for getting guidance in every aspect of life. From the very ancient times, the sages sought the guidance of a perfect spiritual master for God Realisation. The Hindu philosophy explains that we can escape from human predicament and attain salvation only with the help of a *guru*. Only an illuminated soul can enlighten the other one. This paper deals with the Hindu perspective which advocates the need of a spiritual guide for getting spiritual insight and eternal liberation.

Key words: Disciple, Eternal, Hinduism, Liberation, Master, Philosophy.

Introduction

The quest for Divine is as old as the human creation. Man has ever made effort to know the Truth. The seekers ever subdued to God and worked hard to attain enlightenment. The search for merger with the Creator has always been there. The ancient scriptures of India have always shown us light towards this direction. There have been seekers in our history who have found Him with their hard work and penance. But this could be actually possible with the help of a *guru* or a spiritual master. The various writings of mystics and sages suggest this. The seekers of the mystical path have been guided by their living master. The ancient scriptures suggest that the disciples grow spiritually when they bond with their master and follow his instructions. It is only with the master's guidance that they are able to find the True Reality. Religion as a group is formed by people. But beneath every religion, the essence of the teachings is the same. There have been innumerable mystics who have guided their disciples to get spiritual insight. Without being bonded in the outer sects, if we delve deep, we find that in various schools of philosophy there have been adepts who have been helping their followers to realise the Truth. The impulse of longing for Reality has been universal. The great saints have always been compassionate and merciful on the disciples and have helped them to move on the path of spiritual liberation. This paper deals with the need of a spiritual guide for enlightenment as advocated by the Hindu philosophy. The four major eras of Hindu literature have stressed the importance of a spiritual master. The way of expression may differ but they all emphasise that it is essential to have a bond between the master and his disciple for

spiritual growth. In the Vedic period (approx. 1500 to 500 BCE) the importance of master was emphasised for worldly as well as spiritual life. It is required to have either one master or separate masters for the learning of both the worlds. The outward rituals, reading of the scriptures and leading a moral way of life was a part of learning. It was the spiritual master who initiated the disciple for his spiritual life. By constant meditation one can move on the path of liberation.

In the classical period (500 BCE to 1200 CE), many scriptures other than the *Vedas* were studied by the path seekers. The narratives of these scriptures presented the conversation of gods and goddesses and human incarnation of God and the humans who were thirsty for spiritual knowledge. These conversations were loaded with deep ideas of spirituality. In the *Ramayana*, a great epic, we read about the conversation and relationship of God incarnation Lord Ram with his disciples and seekers of truth like Hanuman and Shabari. The *Bhagvad Gita*, a part of the great epic the *Mahabharata*, too presents Lord Krishna as the God incarnate. Here too we find enlightening conversation of Lord Krishna, the master, and Arjuna, his disciple. He shows the path seekers the right way to enlightenment. Swami Prabhupada in his commentary on the verses of the *Bhagvad Gita* comments that Arjuna, who was earlier a friend of Krishna, after being enlightened, decides to surrender to Krishna and accept Krishna as his spiritual master:

He offers himself to Krsna as a disciple. He wants to stop friendly talks.
Talks between the master and the disciple are serious, and now Arjuna
wants to talk very seriously before the recognized spiritual master. Krsna
is therefore the original spiritual master of the science of *Bhagavad-gita*,
and Arjuna is the first disciple for understanding the *Gita*.¹

The saints and the mystics of the *Bhakti* period (1200-1800 CE) have written considerably about the spiritual path. Their writings and discourses show that a bonding of master and disciple is necessary for the seekers of true path. Unlike the saints of earlier periods who gave deep philosophy in scriptures and epics, the saints of this period used the language of common masses. They focussed on writing of poems and songs which could easily be comprehended. These writings were loaded with deep spiritual ideas. They also showed a longing for the Divine which was inspired by the masters of these writers. Saints of this period like Kabir, Ravidas, Mira Bai have tried to remove the veil of ignorance and bring forth the true light.

In the modern times (1900 CE to the present) we find a cross fertilization of culture and ideas. Globalisation has paved the path to the knowledge of other continents. There have been many spiritual masters of India who have transmitted the knowledge of Indic philosophy and Hinduism to the entire world. One of the greatest among them is Swami Vivekanand who spread the knowledge of Vedant to the western world. He elaborated the different types of yoga in his writings such as Raja-yoga, Karma-yoga, Jnana-yoga and Bhakti-yoga. He deeply influenced the youth to move on the path of spiritual awakening. He founded the Ramkrishna Mission on the name of his guru Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa. His spiritual wisdom echoes throughout the world. Similarly Ramana Maharshi too spread this spiritual knowledge. The periods from the ancient to the modern have been various but beneath them the essence of the teachings has been the same. The Hindu philosophy has always laid emphasis on the need of a close relationship of a master and his disciple. It is central to the life of spirituality. The master is one who is a realised soul, a perfection personified. Ramana Maharshi says, "But in the highest and truest meaning of the word, the guru is he who has realised Oneness with the Spirit that is the Self of all. This is the satguru (true guru)."² There have been masters like Chanakya who helped in growing the worldly

power of Chandragupta Maurya. There also have been the masters like Guru Ramdas who guided Shivaji on spiritual path. Shivaji performed his duty of kingship as a service to his master. The Hindu saints have always shown the importance of master for a disciple who wants to seek the path of liberation. In *Ramcharitmanas*, Goswami Tulsidas talks of this in various verses: "None can cross the ocean of mundane existence without a guru, even though he is the equal of Lord Brahma or Shiva."³ Sahjo Bai, a saint of eighteenth century says,

Without the guru neither can one
tread the spiritual path,
nor can one attain knowledge.
Without the guru it is all doubt and delusion.
The life without the guru is a total loss.⁴

Similarly, the great Hindu sages, who had deep knowledge of scriptures and arts, looked for gurus for crossing this world which is an ocean of sorrows. It is the mercy of God that one may get associated to an enlightened soul. Only the enlightened ones can enlighten the others. Saints like Narad and kings like Pipa searched for a spiritual master. The God incarnate Ram too sought the help of his guru Vashistha. It is only through guru that one may have a direct communion with the Divine. Human beings are born with weaknesses which bind them to the world. If great saints needed masters, it is very clear that we commoners too need the help of a master for our liberation. We are afflicted by various weaknesses. Patanjali explains: "Wrong knowledge, I-ness, attachment, aversion and constant fear of death are the great afflictions (of worldly life)."⁵ Due to ignorance the condition of humans is pathetic. We suffer with ego, attachment, greed, anger and fear. We live in illusion and feel ourselves separate from the creator. This gives birth to ego. Due to this we suffer in this vicious circle of birth and death. Revolving in different births we hanker for various desires. Each birth is followed by death and so we have the fear of death. Tulsidas describes the suffering of the soul as:

The soul is a particle of God.
Hence, it is immortal, conscious, pure
and the storehouse of divine bliss.
Yet, under the influence of Maya,
The soul's consciousness is obscured.⁶

The soul is caught in the clutches of karmas and so the Hindu saints have enlightened us that it is not possible for an individual soul on its own to break away from the worldly bond. All intellectual knowledge and good actions too cannot help us out. Only a perfect spiritual master can help us sail through this ocean of life. The *Katha Upanishad* looks into our situation and gives the path of release as:

Words cannot reveal him (God).
Mind is unable to reach him.
The eyes do not see him.
How then can he be comprehended,
save when taught by those
Who indeed have known Him.⁷

A Hindu saint Samkaradeva was an Indian mystic of fifteenth century. He too says that the initial step on spiritual path is the control of the mind. It is the mind which is the enemy of the soul. One needs to control it for breaking the worldly bondage. But we are not capable of doing this on our own. It is

only with the help of the master that we can win over our mind. Even Swami Vivekanand has said that with the help of the higher soul, we become aware of our potential. He remarks, "...spiritual life is awakened, growth is animated, and man becomes holy and perfect in the end."⁸ In the twentieth century the Divine Life Society was founded by Swami Sivanand. He too has advocated the need of a guru for spiritual journey. He says, "To light a candle, you need a burning candle...an illumined soul alone can enlighten another soul."⁹ Thus we conclude that from ancient times the Hindu philosophy emphasised the importance of a spiritual guide for the spiritual seekers for attaining inner illumination. One may be liberated only if a perfect spiritual master transmits the knowledge to the aspirant soul. Adi Shankaracharya was a great saint of classical period. He was a great scholar of Vedant. He advocated a life of harmony. He taught about self knowledge for spiritual liberation. He gave the insight that it is with the identity of the Atman that one is able to get salvation or *moksha*. Shankaracharya was a great exponent of spirituality. He too was initiated by a spiritual master. He says, "There are three things which are rare indeed and are due to the grace of God – namely a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfect sage."¹⁰ The scriptures and sages advocate the importance of a living master. Some mystics have tried to awaken that one should not run after the dead masters. Instead one should search for a living master. Sivanand ji feels that only reading of scriptures is like a dark forest wherein it is difficult to get the right direction. It is only the *guru* who can help the aspirant sail through this path successfully. After having a brief survey of Hindu scriptures and literature, we come to realise that a spiritual guide is central to a disciple's spiritual insight. The path of God realisation is very difficult. The challenges cannot be met alone by the individual soul. Thus, there is a necessity of a master who can take us out of human predicament and lead us to the path of spiritual liberation.

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