

What is Gurupasadana?

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PART II

Introduction

The word *gurūpasadana* means approaching the qualified teacher. In the earlier essay, we had seen the definition of a Guru. The Guru should be

1. a *brahmaniṣṭha* having a direct and firm experience of *Brahman* (*aparokṣānubhūti*) and also be a

2. *śrotriya* having a thorough grasp of the Scriptures. Only such a qualified Guru is capable of destroying the *pañca-bhedas*¹ or five kinds of ignorance-based notions of division and bestow liberation on the student.

In this essay, we shall elaborate on a few other aspects like the importance of the Guru, the mode of approaching the Guru, *guru-upāsana* and *guru-seva*.

Guru is indispensable

Do we require a Guru to guide us to the knowledge of

brahman or is it possible to gain it without any guidance? Some people opine that one can dispense with both the Guru and the *Śastras* (Scripture), while others say that since the Guru only explains the *Śastras* he may be dispensed with, provided one is knowledgeable and intel-

¹ For explanations on *brahmaniṣṭha*, *śrotriya* and *pañca-bhedas* please refer to *What is Gurupasadana?* (Part I), which appeared in the January 2003 issue of *Tapovan Prasad*.

lignant enough to understand the Scriptures independently. Both these opinions are wrong.

The Scriptures emphatically declare “*Ācāryavān puruṣo veda* — only the person who has learnt the Scriptures from a Teacher knows the Truth”. Why is this so?

1. *The Knowledge has to be revealed.*

The Knowledge of the Self has to be revealed. It cannot just come upon oneself by accident. One does not arrive at it by chance as one would sight a rare bird. The Self, which is the very Self of the seeker, cannot be objectified and it has to be revealed by a person who has come to experience it.

2. *The Guru is the proof of the knowledge.*

Even if the Scriptures point out the Self as being beyond the body and one with the Self of all, one may never come to trust the existence of this Knowledge and the promised result without seeing someone actually abiding in the Knowledge and showing us the possibility of ourselves also coming to that

divine awakening. It is the Guru who creates this trust in us and even in the infallibility of the *Śāstras*.

3. *Mere Knowledge of Sanskrit is insufficient.*

Even to understand the *Upaniṣads*, mere knowledge of Sanskrit grammar or other aspects of the scriptural studies like prosody, etymology etc. will not be of much use. The *Upaniṣads* are full of seeming illogical contradictions and are quite elusive and impossible to understand without guidance. A few statements from the *Upaniṣads* themselves will drive home this point. While describing the nature of the Self we have declarations like a) *Aṅoraṇīyān mahato mahīyān*: The Self is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great (*Kāṭha Upaniṣad* I.ii.20) b) *Dūrāt sudūre tadīhāntike ca*: It is farther away than the far-off, and It is near at hand too (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III.i.7).

A thing can be either subtle or gross, near or far, but not both at the same time. But the *Upaniṣads* speak of the Self as

both. How does one understand these statements?

Reading the *Upaniṣads* which are replete with perplexing illogical statements such as these, some Western scholars have concluded that the *Upaniṣads* are the 'prattling of human society in their early infancy'. Their immature, yet, very logical conclusion is no wonder at all for they have tried to understand the Scriptures independently without the guidance of the Guru, with only Sanskrit dictionaries and the help of their grasp of knowledge in other fields like *Vedic* prosody, etymology, etc.

The abstruse way of the Scriptures

The Scriptures have a very stupendous and awesome job before them. They need to communicate *through words* the nature of the Self, which is *beyond words* to an earnest seeker. The words have their field only in the realm of objects, feelings and ideas. Words can describe an object like a rose, a person like the Prime Minister, an emotion like love or an idea or theory like the black-hole. But the Self is neither an object, person,

emotion nor a thought (OET). Now, how can that which is beyond the ken of words be communicated by words?

There is another way in which we can explain the limitation of words. Words can describe an object that can be categorised (*jāti*), which possesses qualities (*guṇa*), has an action (*kriyā*) and which is related to something else (*saṁbandha*). We can describe Mr. Muralidhar to be a man (not a woman, i.e., *jāti*) who is short in height (*guṇa*), who is working as a head-cook at the Hotel Carlton (*kriyā*) and is a friend of Mr. Kumar (*saṁbandha*). But how can the Self which is bereft of all the above four characteristics be described by words?

But this is exactly what the *Upaniṣads* have done successfully through some very special and astounding teaching techniques. They have used the very words which we use in our day-to-day parlance but in unique fashions, which have not been and cannot be used in any other field of knowledge. They use a technique of *placing mutually contradictory words in juxtaposition*, as seen in the examples discussed above, like 'It is far

as well as near', 'It is gross as well as subtle', to prevent any possibility of the student objectifying or conceptualising the Self as an idea. This is just one of the techniques adopted. Refer to the *Kenopaniṣad* (I.4) "*anyadeva tad vidadāto aviditād adhi* – it is beyond the known as well as the unknown", where by suggestive implication the Self is pointed out as the very subject.

Also the famous *neti neti* — not this, not this of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka śruti* where the technique of *absolute negation* is used. These are just to point out a few. There are techniques galore.

The Guru alone can decipher the Scriptures

This style of the Scriptures can confound even a learned and brilliant scholar. Their style can be deciphered only by a *śrotirya-brahmaniṣṭha* Guru who can wield the *Śāstras* to give a right and coherent understanding to the student. Hence Sri Sankaracharya says emphatically in his commentary on the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*: "*Śāstrajñō'pi svātantryeṇa brahmajñānānveṣaṇam na kuryāt*

— Even though one may be well versed in the Scriptures one should not independently pursue the knowledge of *Brahman*".

One can compare the *Vedas* to the vast ocean and the Guru to the clouds. A person who drinks the saline water directly from the ocean does not get the benefit of his thirst being quenched. On the other hand, his thirst becomes more severe. The Guru is like the cloud. He absorbs the water and gives it to sincere seekers in its pristine and palatable form. Many thanks and prostrations to the Guru. *Śrī Sadgurunath maharāj ki jai* — Glory unto the Guru!

Varna and Ashrama are no bar for the Guru

It is to be noted that the Guru may belong to any *varna* (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*) or *āśrama* (*brahmacarya*, *grahastha*, *vānaprastha* or *sannyāsa*). Sri Sankaracharya declares in the *Maniṣā-pañcakam* "*Dṛḍhaprajñāpi yasyāsti cet cāṇḍālo'stu sa tu dvijo'stu gururityeṣā maniṣā mama* — It is my firm understanding that he alone is my Guru who has a firm understanding of the Self, be he a *cāṇḍāla* (out

caste) or a learned *brāhmin*". Also we find examples of householder teachers in the Scriptures like *Śrī Yājñyavalkya*, *Śrī Uddālaka* and *Śrī Vasiṣṭha*. Thus the only qualifications for the Guru are his knowledge of the Scripture (*srotriya*) and the firm abidance in the Knowledge (*brahma- niṣṭha*).

Extraneous details like *varṇa* and *āśrama* are inconsequential in the matter of *Brahma- vidyā*.

Approaching the Guru

The student is traditionally supposed to approach the Teacher with *samit*, the sacrificial faggots which are used as fuel in the *vedic* fire rituals like the *homas*. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (I.ii.12) says:

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत् समित्पाणिः
श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ।

*tadvijñānārthaṁ sa
gurumevābhigacchet
samtīpāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ
brahmaṇiṣṭham.*

Let him, in order to obtain the knowledge of the Eternal, take sacrificial faggots in his hands and approach that Preceptor alone who

is well versed in the *Vedas* and is established in *Brahman*.

In the days of yore when there used to be regular *homas* and *yāgas* conducted at the *gurukulas*, there was always a need for the *samits* (sacrificial faggots). Offering of the *samit* symbolised *seva-bhāva*, the attitude of service. It meant "O Guru! I am at Your service. Your word is my command and Your desire my will."

Guru-Upasana

The tradition of *Sanātana Dharma* gives great importance to the Guru. When Kabirdas was asked as to whom he would first render his prostrations to, if the God and the Guru came together, he replied unhesitatingly that his first prostration would be to the Guru. The reason he gave was that it was only by the revelation of the Guru that he came to recognise the Lord! In many Indian homes, verses like "*gururbrahmā gurur- viṣṇuḥ gururdevo maheśvaraḥ, gurureva paraṁ brahma tasmāi śrīgurave namaḥ*" are chanted daily. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* asserts that the Scriptures reveal their meanings only to the person who has *Īśvara-*

bhāva in the Guru (the conviction of Guru being *Īśvara*).

यस्य देवे परा भक्तिः यथा देवे तथा गुरौ ।

तस्यैते कथिता ह्यर्थाः प्रकाशन्ते महात्मनः ॥

*yasya deve parā bhaktiḥ
yathā deve tathā gurau,
tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ
prakāśante mahātmanah*

It is for him who has immense devotion for the Lord and who possesses the equal and same sort of devotion to his Guru, that the *Upanishads* are explained and to him alone the *Upanishads* will reveal their highest truths.

Uttama-adhikaris of *Vedānta*, with devotion and total surrender, worship the Guru himself as their *Īṣṭadevatā* (the chosen Lord of their heart). This worship of the Guru is called *guru-upāsana*.

Surrender and Service unto the Guru

On reaching the Guru the seeker should offer *sāṣṭāṅga-namaskāra*. '*Namaskāra*' means 'prostration'. '*Sāṣṭāṅga*' (*sa+aṣṭa+aṅga*) means 'along with the eight limbs'. Thus *Sāṣṭāṅga-namaskāra* means prostration with the eight limbs. The eight limbs or parts of the body used for *Sāṣṭāṅga-namaskāra* are

(a) the two feet (b) two knees (c) two hands (d) chest and (e) the head. When one does a prostration in this fashion, the body lies flat on the ground like a fallen stick (*daṇḍavat*). This symbolises complete humility and total surrender to the Guru. Though the action or ritual of prostration has its own value, the inner attitude of surrender is most important. Mere action without the right attitude is of minimal value. And if the attitude is there, physical prostration becomes quite natural. Devotion gives rise to surrender and only to a student who has surrendered, the teachings of the Guru bear fruit. This surrender is at four levels:

1. *Śarīra-arpaṇa*: *Śarīra* means the 'body' and '*arpaṇa*' means 'offering'. Engaging oneself physically in the service of the Guru (like cleaning the *Gurukula*) comes under this category.
2. *Mana-arpaṇa*: Having the attitude of the Lord in one's Guru is called *mana-arpaṇa* or offering of the mind. A disciple should ever meditate on the divine form of the Guru in one's heart. One's behaviour should be always endearing to the Guru and there

should be no fault-finding at all. The Guru should be considered as Viṣṇu, Śiva, Ganga and Surya. When the Guru is kind, he should be considered as Viṣṇu, as Śiva when he is angry, as Brahma when he is actively engaged in action, when he is serene he is to be known as placid *Gaṅgā* and when he destroys the darkness of one's ignorance with the bright effulgence of his teaching he should be considered as *Sūra* (Sun god). In this way one sees only the Lord in one's Guru in all his modes of being and finds no faults with him at all.

3. *Dhana-arpaṇa*: One has a sense of ownership in one's wealth, home, land, etc. Technically, these are called wealth, and offering them to the Guru is known as *dhana-arpaṇa*. The Guru may not accept it, for he may not need it at all. *Dhana-arpaṇa* only indicates one's willingness to give up all for the sake of the knowledge and one's desire to be of service to the Guru.
4. *Vāk-arpaṇa*: *Vāk-arpaṇa* is to be ever engaged in the praise of one's Guru and never to indulge in talking about his

faults, true or imaginary.

All this may seem too exaggerated in these times of selfishness, mistrust and glorified individualism. One may feel that the Guru would take advantage of this kind of total surrender and use the student for his own personal and selfish ends. A true Guru has no selfish goals. He ever revels in the happiness of the student. But what about the false Guru? God save the Guru!! In God's infinite mercy, no sincere student gets trapped by a false teacher. And he is a sincere student who never judges the Guru from his limited understanding.

The essence of *arpaṇa* (surrender) can be illustrated with a beautiful story. A king approached a Guru and requested instruction on the Self. The Guru directed him to do a rigorous twelve-year service at the *ashram's* cowshed before he would teach him. The king refused to serve. He felt it was demeaning and left. He returned after two years and requested once again to be taught. The Guru now directed him to the cowshed for twenty years. This time the king willingly went to take up the service. Even before the king had

reached the cowshed the Guru called for him and directed him to get ready for the Teaching. The king said that he had not even started the service. The Guru replied that it is not the service, which really matters, but the willingness to serve!

Conclusion

Wholehearted surrender to the Guru is an absolute must. Only a heart that has been perfected with love and devotion to the Guru can have faith in the Teaching and become capable of soaring into divine *Vedāntic* heights. When such a highly qualified student characterised by the

1. willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of *Brahma-Vidyā*
2. endowed with total surrender to the Guru and

3. possessing a firm understanding that the Guru is verily the *pratyakṣa-Īśvara* (the visible Lord)

reaches the lotus feet of the benevolent Guru, he bestows upon him the liberating Knowledge of *Vedānta* and lifts him from the mire of *samsāra*. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (I.ii.13) echoes this strongly when it says, "To that pupil who has thus approached him respectfully, whose mind is calm and serene and whose senses are subdued, let the wise Teacher truly teach *Brahma Vidyā* through which the immortal Self is known".

In the forthcoming essays, we shall enquire into the methodology of *Vedāntic* instruction – the famous technique of deliberate superimposition (*adhyāropa*) and subsequent negation (*apavāda*).

