TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Guru in Hinduism

> Not by reasoning is this sacred doctrine to be attained;
> Taught by another it is well understood.
>
> *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.9.

NOWADAYS spiritual directors are out and the *guru* is in — a wise preceptor who solves all problems with a mystic saying or some mildly incomprehensible *koan*. The deeper appreciation we now have for indian spirituality is clearly to be welcomed. Even when it takes the form of a sort of craze for oriental exotica there are immense benefits to be gained from an acquaintance with another religious tradition and from the dialogue-in-practice which it occasions. But the *guru* in Hinduism is both more and less than a spiritual director and our homely caricature (which, no doubt, no one takes seriously) does have the unfortunate side-effect of trivializing the richness of the real hindu tradition. Certainly the *guru* is a spiritual guide. But that does not say a great deal for Hinduism is all about *sādhana,* a word which connotes the purposive quest of a particular goal and might almost be translated as the search for one's literal 'spiritual direction'; the *guru* is but one means to this general and all-embracing end.

More importantly, the *guru* is what in India is often called a *jñāni* or 'realized soul'. He is the one who knows, who has experienced the presence of God within. And only the one who has attained such a contemplative knowledge of God can communicate it to others. To speak of the *guru,* therefore, is to take up a theme which is profoundly indian and which only really makes sense against its properly indian background. What is it that he knows? And how is that knowledge to be passed on? The object of this article is to answer such questions by finding the right setting, by considering what sort of a tradition the *guru* comes from, and by suggesting an appropriately indian understanding of his role.

To find our indian setting let us begin in the holy city of Varanasi or Benares. Here every devout Hindu wishes to die, to be cremated at the burning *ghat* and have his ashes returned to the sacred river Ganges and thence, he hopes, to immortality with the gods. Varanasi is a centre of pilgrimage. Every morning, as the sun rises over the river, devotees swarm down to the bathing-places to perform their ritual ablutions. The endless tinkling bells and cymbals, the singing of *bhajans,* the recitation of prayers, and, perhaps more than anything else, the cheerfully chaotic city itself with its narrow winding back-streets where one's progress is quite likely to be halted by a somnolent but quite immoveable cow, all tell of a religion of great power and colour but precious little organization. The

mistake is probably to regard Hinduism as one religion. It is really a whole complex of beliefs and practices, some complementary, some contradictory, which defy reduction to easy dogmas and formulae. To pick out one or two as 'key' is to risk distortion. Nevertheless, a certain ill-defined structure does make itself felt. It is probably best illustrated by the image of the mighty river Ganges itself.

For obvious reasons rivers are regarded as sacred and no river is more sacred than the Ganges. The water which flows down from the Himalayas brings life and a source of purification. More importantly it represents the whole cycle of creation which emanates from the home of the gods, Mount Meru, the centre of the universe, and includes the whole continuum of creation, from the gods themselves to the crops which grow along the river-banks, and the thousands of tiny creatures who depend ultimately on the life-giving waters for their very existence. The act of piety which casts the ashes of the dead into the river simply completes the cycle. Creation returns to the source from which it comes. The river flows on to become one with the vastness of the ocean from whence it will return eventually as rain upon the cosmic mountain and the whole cycle begins again. This is the cycle of *Samsāra,* literally what-flows-together, a word which denotes the endless round of births, deaths and rebirths, and which we have come to call the transmigration of souls. Two other ideas make up the basic structure of indian religion, whether at Varanasi or elsewhere: the first is the concept of *Karma,* literally work, which refers to the positive or negative value of one's actions as the determining factor of the nature of one's next life; the other is *Moksha,* the state of absolute release, however conceived, from the whole painful cycle of rebirth.

This decidedly unwieldy complex of ideas did not emerge as the logical outcome of an original revelation or teaching. Hinduism can be traced back to the *Vedas,* perhaps as far as 1500 B.C., but formative influences were at work long before that, and perhaps the most significant creative period in the religion comes with the *Upanishads,* the earliest of which are to be dated around 700 B.C. Here we find references to groups of ascetics who have renounced their normal worldly ties and are wandering around the country seeking for the way to achieve *Moksha* and existing by begging in the villages. Where these people come from and how they are to be distinguished from the distinctly heterodox buddhist and jain communities who flourished at approximately the same time, is still a matter of scholarly dispute. One point, however, is clear: the religion we call Hinduism is the result of a long-established tension betwen the traditional religion of society characterized by devotion and ritual, keeping in tune with *Samsāra,* the whole cycle of creation, and the more radical asceticism of the renouncer with its concern for personal experience and assurance that one has achieved true *Moksha.* Both these types of religion are present in modern Varanasi. In large temples and the most basic of wayside shrines people

make their offerings and recite prayers, a witness to the extraordinary faith which characterizes the holy city. But alongside the ordinary devotees and pilgrims are the spiritual élite, the holy men, usually clad in saffron robes, often dusty and dirty and looking more than slightly disreputable, and just occasionally showing by their peaceful and serene expressions that they have come close to the *Moksha* they seek.

Just how many are charlatans it is difficult to say. The influx of western seekers-after-truth on the various well-travelled hippie trails means that there is an adequate supply of gullible customers. But India itself has always been fascinated by the exotic and mysterious. Stories abound of the marvellous feats and esoteric powers enjoyed by all sorts of weird and wonderful characters. In the *Rig Veda,* for instance, we hear of the long-haired ascetic who drinks hallucinatory drugs and 'rides with the rush of the wind'.[1] The ancient epics and *Purānas* are full of the exploits of spiritual virtuosi who find the way to *Moksha* the hard way — by self-inflicted torture, for instance, standing for years on one leg or with one arm held up in the air. Nor are these legends just fanciful stories, as pictures in contemporary magazines indicate. In every temple compound is to be found a gaggle of homeless mendicants, clanking their tins and begging for alms — another hurdle to be negotiated by the intrepid tourist, but, for the devout Hindu, figures of great holiness and sources of religious merit. What began as a rejection of the tradition, born of a dissatisfaction with the ritual of the *Veda,* has now become a respected part of the mainstream and institutionalized under the title of *Sannyāsa.* A true *sannyāsi* has abandoned all ties with the world and wanders homeless, begging his food and eating only enough to sustain his life in a relentless search for Ultimate Truth.

Yet the *sannyāsi* is not a parasite upon society. If anything, the reverse is the truth — at least religiously. For the holy man is a sacrament of the Divine — not just a reminder of religious values in a world given over to the pursuit of gain and self-interest, but a real contact with the God who is 'so hard to see'. Merely to set eyes on a holy man, still more to enter into his presence and hold converse with him, is in some sense a communion with God. The relationship of the pupil with his *guru* is one aspect of this vision of the Divine present in and through the human. The primary religious act is not to seek advice or direction but to receive *darshan* — a word which literally means observation or sight, but connotes the act of entering into the presence of the *guru* in order to benefit from the Divine Power which, as it were, radiates from him. In the first place the *guru* is simply a teacher. The earliest *gurus* were brahmins whose task was to preserve the traditional lore of the *Vedas* by passing it on to the privileged higher castes. Young boys went through a stage of life called *Brahmacarya* when they gave themselves over totally to the direction of their teacher. According to the ancient texts they should revere him even more than their parents, for whereas parents give physical life, it is in the power of the *guru*

to bring about a second, a spiritual birth. But the word *guru* means weighty or authoritative, and that gives some indication of his true function. The real *guru* has personal authority, not something inherited or the possession of a privileged caste, but a clear indication that this man has himself experienced the Divine. He knows. He has entered the presence of God.

The *guru* is more than a teacher or personal mentor. He is also a philosopher and a sort of spiritual artist, conjuring new ideas and themes out of the richness of vedic religion. As the sage who knows, the teacher of the one who seeks to learn, he is the guide to our understanding of the *Upanishads,* those complex mystical writings which are the philosophical heart of so much of indian religion. The word *Upanishad* means something like sitting-down-near. The texts themselves are often couched in the form of a dialogue between the guru and the disciple whom he initiates into the true meaning of the ancient vedic sacrifice. And the teaching is often esoteric, a private revelation. Thus when the young man, Artabhāga, comes to the great sage Yājñavalkya and asks what happens to a person after death, he gets the reply, 'Artabhāga, my dear, take my hand. We two only will know of this. This is not for us two to speak of in public'. The author of the text comments: 'The two went away and deliberated. What they said was *karma* (action). What they praised was *karma.* Verily, one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action'.[2]

This is not book learning. Such teaching is to be assimilated through the heart. The external ritual must be interiorized; the gods are to be found through introspection and meditation. Ultimately, teach the sages, *Brahman,* the impersonal Holy Power which pervades the universe, is to be integrated with *Ātman,* that spiritual power which is the 'spark of the Divine' the individual's own deepest self. In a celebrated dialogue Uddālaka tries to explain to his pupil, Śvetaketu:

> 'Place this salt in the water. In the morning come unto me.'
> Then he did so.
> Then he said to him: 'That salt you placed in the water last evening — please bring it hither'.
> Then he grasped for it but did not find it, as it was completely dissolved.
> 'Please take a sip of it from this end', he said. 'How is it?'
> 'Salt.'
> 'Take a sip from the middle', said he. 'How is it?'
> 'Salt.'
> 'Take a sip from that end', said he. 'How is it?'
> 'Salt.'
> 'Set it aside. Then come unto me.'
> He did so, saying, 'It is always the same'.
> Then he said to him: 'Verily, indeed, my dear, you do not perceive Being here. Verily indeed, it is here.

> That which is the finest essence — this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is *Ātman* (Soul). That art thou, Śvetaketu.'[3]

The *guru* is the one who has already experienced this identity in his own life, whose past *karma* has been neutralized through a mystical gnosis, and who has therefore achieved *Moksha,* true liberation of the Spirit which is, as it were, imprisoned in his mortal body. The teaching of the *Upanishads* is often notoriously obscure, but then knowledge has to be thoroughly assimilated; it cannot simply be taken on trust. The *guru's* experience must become that of his pupil. We search the texts in vain for the secret of 'how it is done'. Everything depends not on technique but on the living tradition which is passed on only through a personal and very intimate relationship. For the disciple the *guru* is the means of direct access to God.

The understanding of *Moksha* varies. For some schools — and this is particularly true of the *Upanishads* — it is just a monistic merging of the self back into the One from which it came, as the drop of water is reunited with the ocean. But there are also theistic schools where the *summum bonum* is the vision of a personal God. All depends on the relationship of loving devotion or *bhakti* which is established with him. In this type of religion the most celebrated *guru* is undoubtedly the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gītā* who appears as the charioteer of the young warrior Arjuna but is really an incarnation of the great god Vishnu. The dialogue of the *Gītā* begins with a careful imparting of information, gradually builds up the level of trust between teacher and disciple and climaxes with the most incredible theophany in which Krishna reveals himself in all his glory to his adoring pupil. Having assumed his human form once again, Krishna addresses Arjuna:

> Right hard to see is this my form which you have seen: this is the form the gods themselves forever crave to see. Not by the *vedas* or grim-ascetic-practice, not by the giving of alms or sacrifice can I be seen in such a form as you did see Me; but by worship-of-love addressed to Me, none other, Arjuna, can I be known and seen in such a form and as I really am. So can my lovers enter into Me. Do works for Me, make Me your highest goal, be loyal-in-love to Me, cut off all other attachments, have no hatred for any other being at all: for all who do thus shall come to Me.[4]

Krishna is in fact the *guru* par excellence — the complete and undivided focus of attention. Arjuna is told simply to surrender his entire will and all his actions to Krishna. More than a teacher, Krishna has become the centre of all adoration.

The position that Krishna holds in the *Bhagavad Gītā,* combining the

qualities of the all-knowing sage with the compassion of the Divine, goes some way to explaining the high position which the *guru* holds in contemporary Hinduism. Most modern Hindus follow the way of *Bhakti,* that is to say are devotees of one of the two great gods, Vishnu or Siva, or of one of their many incarnations or local forms. In addition devotion is also accorded to the various forms of the goddess and to any number of lesser gods and spirits. Such religion is often highly emotional and charged with a deep and moving faith; great emphasis is placed on the value of personal experience. For the most part, the holy man or *sannyāsi,* whether he is a *guru* who initiates disciples into the secrets of the sect, or just one of the eccentric crew of hangers-on muttering *mantras* at the temple gate, is a remote and mysterious figure. But without him Hinduism would lose much of its creative energy. At one level the *guru* is just a teacher — of anything, from dancing or singing to the esoteric secrets of religion. But there are also leaders of sects, maintaining age-old traditions, heads of *maths* or monasteries, and men whose claim to fame is simply their very obvious holiness and wisdom. But even such broad definitions fail to fit the complexity of Hinduism. In general a *guru* is anyone or indeed anything (in Sikhism, for instance, the *guru* is the book of sacred scriptures, the *Guru Granth Sahib)* through which one attains enlightenment or *Moksha.* The *guru* is the means, a focus in which the Divine has become so intensely localized that for the devotee he or it *is* the Divine.

While it is difficult to be precise, the career of the *guru* tends to follow a fairly typical pattern. As a young man he leaves home, preferring the wandering life of *Sannyāsa* to the more conventional way of marriage. He moves from one holy place to another, perhaps encountering various teachers on the way, until finally he meets the *guru* with whom he can establish an immediate and lasting rapport. The disciple remains with the *guru* in his *ashram* or hermitage, committing himself to him and promising to obey him in everything. Eventually he will receive initiation or *dīkshā* from his teacher. He is given a special *mantra,* perhaps a verse from scripture or a sacred syllable, which is believed to have an inherent power for enlightenment concentrated within it. The *mantra* is kept secret; it is the personal gift of the *guru* and is appropriate for the age, temperament and spiritual progress of the disciple. In some way it sums up the teaching of the *guru.* The disciple makes it the centre of his devotion, repeating it over and over again. The *mantra* is the key to *Moksha* — the direct communication of *guru* to disciple. Once he has grasped the full import of his master's instruction and achieved great spiritual progress, the disciple, while still maintaining his loyalty to the *guru,* may leave the *ashram* or found his own elsewhere. His reputation for holiness will eventually bring him his own disciples in turn. Or he may succeed his old master when he dies, thus continuing the tradition of initiation handed down from one generation of *gurus* to another.

Strictly speaking a holy man only becomes a *guru* when he has a disciple. In the first place he is the one who has obtained *Moksha* and is therefore able to guide others by his own experience. But the communication of that experience is not a purely intellectual exercise. More often than not it takes place in silence as *guru* and disciple meditate together, and the pupil learns to feed off the deep spiritual riches which radiate from the master. Abhishiktananda, the benedictine priest Henri Le Saux, who led the life of a traditional indian *sannyāsi* for almost twenty-five years and who came under the influence of one of the most remarkable of contemporary *gurus,* Ramana Maharshi, the sage of Tiruvannamalai in south India, tries to explain:

> If the *guru* keeps silence, there is between him and his disciple a communion and communication on a level much deeper than that of normal consciousness. If the *guru* chooses to speak, his teaching, behind and beneath the words he uses, reaches and opens up in the disciple the very same depth from which it has arisen in the soul of the *guru*. Such is the only means of communicating spiritual truth.[5]

What is required on the part of the disciple is nothing less than total openness and complete surrender to his *guru*. At which point the Christian may well object that such obedience to a human *guru* must be incompatible with discipleship of Christ. For if Jesus says 'You must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master' (Mt 23,8), then none other than Jesus should be called *guru* either. And in the gospels Jesus does appear precisely as a *guru*: he calls himself teacher but he is also the Way, the Truth and the Life and the Light of the world. Above all he is the Word of God who makes known the Father's glory to mankind. Certainly a Christian will find some difficulty over the degree of veneration given to the *guru* and the seeming ease with which Hindus multiply incarnations of the Divine. The uniqueness of Christ can be easily compromised.

Yet may we not also be missing an important insight? The risen Christ, the Christian's *guru,* speaks through silence in the same way as the ideal human *guru* speaks to his disciple. Our western caricature misses the vital point: the *guru* teaches not by what he does, or even by what he says, but by what he is. The true *guru* does not entice or manipulate. He is but a holy presence, a still silence at the heart of a religion which is restlessly seeking the Divine. Most Hindus practise a religion which is based on the temple and the tiny shrines along the roads and in the corners of their houses. Few have ever sought out the *guru* in the silence of far off *ashrams.* But everyone knows that the holy men are there, that the sacred knowledge is being taught and lived — by a very few, perhaps, but by enough to give life and inspiration to the religion of millions of devotees. That there are men in whom the mystical merging of the soul into the One has actually

been experienced is a fact, not just an ideal. Unfortunately, of course, the exaggerated respect shown to some of the more notorious western exports shows Hinduism in a very poor light; all too easily *gurus* can be treated as super-psychiatrists, the objects of a vapid personality cult. Sometimes they deserve no better. But away from the packaged joss-sticks, the instant *Nirvāna* and the benign images of bearded mystics the real tradition is rather different.

In a religion which looks towards the return of all things to their source in the Divine, the *guru* is no longer an individual, still less a personality. He has died completely to this world. Only the One remains. How much of this essentially monistic vision is compatible with Christianity raises many a tricky theological issue which are not to be solved in a handful of pithy sentences. Suffice it to say in conclusion that the relationship of *guru* and disciple is not to be equated with the western idea of spiritual direction. The disciple may seek advice and the *guru* may give it. But unless both are at the same time actively seeking that deeper relationship with God which transcends all human language, no amount of talk will lead to enlightenment. Ultimately the *guru* teaches through example: that in love and humility a silence can be created in which the voice of God may be heard.

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NOTES

[1] *Rig Veda*, X, 136.

[2] *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, 3.2.13. Translated from *The thirteen principal Upanishads* by R. E. Hume (London, 1931).

[3] *Chāndogya Upanishad*, 6.13.1 (*ibid.*).

[4] *Bhagavad Gītā*, 11,52-55. Translated from R. C. Zaehner's edition with commentary (London, 1969).

[5] Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda, a christian approach to advaitic experience* (Delhi, 1974), pp 27-28.