

Guru, Mantra and Initiation

By Swami Swahananda

Swami Swahananda was the head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California from 1976 until his passing on October 19, 2012. This article is based on question-and-answer sessions at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Dallas, which were transcribed and compiled by Ranjana Chopra, President of the Society, and edited by Pravrajika Brahma-prana. This article first appeared in the May 2012 issue of the Vedanta Kesari.

Why Take a Mantra from a Guru?

If a mantra is taken from a book, the results will not be exactly the same as if received directly from a guru, nor will it be a waste of time either. God's name has its own power. Illumined souls explain that if an aspirant learns from a guru who lives the life, who has progressed a little, the results will be greater. One becomes convinced it is possible to realize God after having seen such a soul before one's own eyes. In the struggle Godward, every now and then aspirants become discouraged. Therefore, to keep up the struggle and sustain a certain zeal, one must associate with the holy. That is another benefit of the guru.

Sri Ramakrishna was asked, "Is a guru necessary? Who is the guru?" He explained, "God—Satchidananda—is the guru. Human gurus are the conduits of this supreme Source." Swami Satprakashananda, former head of the St. Louis Vedanta center, had a conflict from whom he should take initiation—Swami Brahmananda or Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. Each one told him to go to the other. Finally he went to Swami Shivananda who said, "It is the same water (meaning the power conveyed from the supreme Guru). Rainwater has fallen from the roof. It is coming out through the mouth of the tiger and the mouth of the lion. There is no distinction between the two." We are only the conduits, the channel through which the guru power flows. If one's guru is evolved, the result will be better. The power of the mantra will be more. Your faith will be more. Your power, mantra power, and the guru power all combined give the results. Mantra power is increased if you have faith, and it increases even more if the teacher has faith.

In another context, Ramakrishna taught: "When one's mind becomes pure, then that mind itself becomes the guru." In other words, the pure mind shows us what is right and what is wrong, what is good what is bad. But one must receive the mantra from a person, a human being. When Swami Brahmananda was asked, "Is a guru necessary?" he replied, "Of course. If you want to learn how

to steal you require a guru. So why not accept a guru for God-realization when one has no immediate experience and the path is not so evident?"

In the Vedanta tradition, the guru is the Veda, which is knowledge not found within the range of ordinary human experience. Anything that is beyond the normal experience must come from some source, and that source is the Veda. It is a self-evident truth. No one has created it; but it exists for all to experience. Ultimately, everything comes from the Veda or from the personal God—Vishnu, Brahma, or Shiva.

The Ramakrishna Tradition

In the Ramakrishna Order the guru tells the disciple, "I am not the guru. The guru is God." Swami Shivananda and other direct disciples of Ramakrishna all verified, "I am not the guru," meaning, according to the guru lineage, the supreme Guru was Sri Ramakrishna.

Furthermore, the direct disciples spoke this way from experience; they did not have the sense of ego, the idea "I am the doer." In them that idea of "I" and "mine" was almost nonexistent. In the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition, their example is normally followed. Although, on one hand we say we are not the guru, but in another sense, we agree that "Yes, we are the human guru." However, before the human guru dies, he should try to inspire initiated devotees that the real guru is not the human guru. The atman within is the real guru. The atman is nothing but God, or the Ishta. In other words, that guru is the real guru, which is God.

Sri Ramakrishna explained that if the human guru has attained a certain spiritual level, he will be released—not the final release, but released into the body of the Ishta, and there he remains identified with the Ishta. Therefore, whenever the human guru is praised by the devotee, that praise actually goes to the Ishta. If the devotee wants to see the guru at the end of his or her life, the guru may come, but really it is God himself who comes.

In this connection, there is a beautiful story of Kusum, a child widow who lived an austere life. Initiated by Swami Subhohananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Kusum was devoted to guru and God. The story goes that she died at the age of forty. On the day that she passed away a light was seen above her house, which some neighbors saw and understood to mean that she had died. Her guru was also aware that she had passed away. After sometime Swami Subhohananda visited that area where Kusum had once lived and came down with a high fever. He was put into a guest house alone, where he tossed and turned all night. Suddenly he saw Kusum sitting by the bed, fanning him.

He asked: “Kusum, where have you come from? Did you not die?” “Yes,” she replied. “Thakur has sent me.” “What happened the day you died?” Swami Subodhananda asked. “I was in great agony,” she explained, “and I was calling on you.” (The guru is considered more accessible, while the Ishta is less so.) “I was calling on you and suddenly I found you had come, hooded, and took me by the hand. We both ascended into the air— higher and higher until we reached a wonderful place. You removed your hood and I saw the face of Thakur smiling. I asked, “What happened to my guru?” Sri Ramakrishna replied, “It was always me. But you were calling on your guru, so I had to take that form when I came to you.”

This story also explains the theory that the guru will not be released until all his disciples are liberated. The guru merges into the Ishta, who does whatever is necessary for the disciple. The Ishta when manifested is the guru. After the human guru passes away, you may think, “The guru has not left me. The guru has become more infinite, more cosmic. The guru is part of the Ishta.” So, do not feel you are not thinking of the guru when you are remembering the Ishta, because the guru’s major job is to introduce you to the Ishta by the mantra.

Swami Vivekananda stipulated that the minimum qualifications of a guru are, first, he must be sinless. Second, he must know the spirit of the scriptures. He need not be a great scholar, but he should have insight into the disciple’s nature and thus be able to recommend proper solutions to spiritual problems. Third, he should be without any worldly motive, keeping the good of the disciple as his main purpose. Therefore the human guru should be ethical and never take advantage of the disciple.

Guru and *Upaguru*

The real guru gives the mantra—that is, the power of the mantra—and helps the disciple mystically. But a teacher who helps an aspirant spiritually in other ways can be called an *upaguru*. Sometimes in the Ramakrishna Order, one’s guru is quite old and has so many disciples that it is difficult to receive an opportunity to go near him for guidance. So often the aspirant will seek out some other senior swami, normally the head of a Ramakrishna Math center, to ask crucial questions about spiritual life. This teacher is called a subsidiary teacher, an *upaguru*, or *sikshaguru*.

Dreams about the Guru

Swami Vivekananda explained, “Deva-swapna satyam”— “Spiritual dreams are true.” Sri Ramakrishna used to say that if one dreams about sannyasis, a

cremation ground, or fire, these are auspicious signs. I normally say that if a dream gives you encouragement, then believe it. If it depresses you, forget it. Do not try to find meaning in everything. But if the guru scolds you in a dream, obey him.

Serving the Guru

The best service one can give the guru is to realize God—have the vision of the *Ishta* or attain *brahmajnana*, knowledge of Brahman. The second best service would be to try to achieve that realization. Another would be to convey Sri Ramakrishna's message to others. Once, Swami Yatiswarananda, later a Vice-President of Ramakrishna Order, wanted to perform *sadhana*, spiritual disciplines, in solitude. Swami Brahmananda, his guru, asked: "How much capacity do you have to do this? We have already done this for you. Go and preach the message of Vivekananda door to door." To lessen the ego, don't think you are preaching, but rather that you are merely conveying the teachings. If you are asked, "Have you realized God?" say, "I believe in God and I have some conviction that God is there, but I have not yet realized Him." We practice humility by not thinking we are either the guru or the teacher.