

# **The Indian Guru and his Disciple**

**Peter L. Brent**

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## **THE AUTHOR**

Peter Brent was the author of many books, among them a major biography of Darwin (*Charles Darwin: A Man of Enlarged Curiosity*); also two studies of the mystical and religious traditions of the East (*Godmen of India* and *Healers of India*), of which this monograph was a forerunner.

# The Indian Guru and his Disciple

The institution of the Guru in Hinduism is based upon that religion's basic scriptures, the Vedas. It stems from the fact that for centuries these were transmitted orally. Derived from the word *vid*, to know, the Vedas are taken by Hindus to be a body of knowledge which exists as natural law is thought to exist. Thus they are supposed never to have been written down, nor even received at some distinguishable moment as Moses is said to have received the Tablets of the Law; rather, they were understood or realized by wise men, the *rishis*, who had achieved a state of unity with what was highest in the world and had in this way put themselves in touch with the subtle vibrations of the Vedas. These scriptures are therefore thought of as eternal, facts of the universe which have been through good fortune and diligence, discovered by Man.

It was always the function of the Brahmin caste to teach and transmit the Vedas and in the *Rig-Veda* it tells us that the Brahmins are God's mouth (a claim the antiquity of which is somewhat undermined by the suggestions which have been made by Max Müller and others that the hymn in which it occurs is a forgery, a later interpolation). The Brahminical families which taught these scriptures claimed descent from the various *rishis* who had first become aware, so to speak, of this or that section of the Vedas. This section then became their particular concern, and the Veda in which they specialized was attached to their name, so that Brahmins who are Gurus in the old style still say that they are 'of the *Rig-Veda*' or 'of the *Atharva-Veda*'.

Because of their importance and because of their method of transmission, the Vedas form a part of *shruti* – 'that which is remembered.' They were meant only for the higher three of the four castes; *shudras*, those of the lowest caste, were threatened with boiling oil poured into their ears if they so much as overheard one of these hymns or ritual instructions. The transmission by word of mouth of this literature must have gone on for many centuries before writing became general in India; the Vedas are thought to be anything from three thousand to six thousand years old. Yet the oldest inscriptions that exist in India, those of King Ashoka, date only from the third century BC, and most manuscripts are considerably more recent than this.

It was the Guru, the Brahmin teacher, who assured that these basic 150,000 words or more would pass successfully and largely unutilated from one generation to the next. He was a married man, a householder

whose home became the home and the school of his pupils. Students who were qualified by birth had to be accepted and, once installed, they became the Guru's responsibility. They, in turn, undertook to serve him in every way, to respect and honour him, and to beg for him. He was not, however, allowed to charge for teaching, nor was the student allowed to pay for being taught. (The way round this, at least for the wealthy, was for the student to 'beg' from his parents; this still happens, and still slightly unsettles the orthodox, even when they do it themselves.) In the early days, the young men who came to the Guru would be expected to do the household chores, the cooking and cleaning, to bath, dress and anoint the Guru and, having begged for his food, to eat only when he had finished and whatever he had left. On the other hand, during the eight years which was the minimum period of a young Brahmin's education – frequently he arrived at the Guru's house as a child of eight or nine and did not leave until his twenties – the Guru was expected to oversee his health, his sleep, his diet, the company he kept, the places he visited.

This ancient Vedic tradition still continues and at various centres in India schools continue to teach these texts in the same way as they have always been taught. One such centre is the small town of Gokarn, on the coast of Mysore State, a place which legend tells us is where the ten-headed hero-king Ravana put down the *atman-linga* granted him by Shiva and saw it turn into a stone cow and begin to sink by its own weight into the ground. Taking a firm hold of the ears, he managed to prevent these at least from disappearing; ear-shaped rocks remain in sight there to this day and have given the town its name which means 'cow's ears'. Here there are several families of Gurus which still own establishments where Brahmin children come to learn.

Not only must the texts be learned, but so must their right pronunciation. Vedic language has three levels, low (*anundatta*), high (*udatta*) and middle (*swarita*), which are usually spoken in that order, each syllable having its correct level. To get these wrong is to give a word a different meaning. The length of time each sound is to be held while chanting must also be learned; this metre is based on the *matra*, the time it takes to pronounce a short vowel, and is absolutely rigid. The boys learn by rote, twenty or more sentences a day, their voices rattling on in a monotonous, apparently endless repetition only broken by the Guru's occasional corrections. When a boy has learned all the sentences of a *shukta*, or chapter, he then repeats the whole passage ten times. When he knows the whole of the Vedas word-perfectly, he is said to be *ghana-pathi* – and he then goes on to learn how to interpret what he now knows by heart. At the same time, he may display his

proficiency at competitions of recitation; to do well at these is to ensure a useful flow of pupils when one begins to teach in one's own turn.

At the same time, since the Vedas are not only hymns but also instructions for rituals, Vedic Gurus perform priestly functions. Often they are the only people left who know how to organize and execute some of these complex ceremonies. Once rituals were the most important elements in Hinduism: the fourth century philosophy called Mimamsa taught that doing the rituals was enough by itself to ensure the rewards of *Karma* – since the Vedas were law, to do what they said brought automatic benefits. Nowadays, however, when the emphasis has shifted to meditation and the merging of Self with the Absolute, fewer and fewer people are willing to spend time, effort and money on the more obscure rituals. Worship centres on the temple rather than the home, and is kept relatively simple. In Gokarn one Guru told me, 'All the ceremonies are becoming a problem to keep up. The chief Guru here has performed *soma-yagna*. That's very rare because it takes a week and costs a lot of money – about five thousand rupees (about £250, but in Indian terms of rather higher value). You have to hold the mouth of a sheep, so that it can't breathe. The sheep's stomach distends and you hit it and it dies. Then you bore a hole into its body and take out its liver and a portion of that is put on the holy fire. The part that's left is then eaten by those who have taken part in the ceremony. You have to kill a sheep a day for six days .... Ceremonies like that used to be paid for by the princely states, but of course they don't exist any more ....'

He believed in the value of these ceremonies and thought that those who performed them did so for the whole world – the world needed them. He was sad, because he knew he was part of a collapsing tradition. More and more of the young people were being educated in schools of the Western type. Not only that – because there was so little money, a new rivalry had developed between Gurus and their pupils: 'They have to share out whatever Vedic ceremonies are arranged. It's naturally going to cost less to get a *chela* (disciple or student) to perform it than to get his teacher.' In the old days, he said, *chelas* would only do such a thing if they had their Guru's permission. Now, in their new need, Gurus refuse such permission – so students if approached perform the rituals without asking their Guru first. This may sometimes be less profitable than it seems, since the man for whom the ceremony is performed can pay what he pleases, and if the student is less than proficient, or less than determined, he may not give much – certainly not as much as he would have given the Guru himself.

When one visits these places it becomes plain that even those most involved know themselves to be at the end of a tradition, among the last generations to keep it even half-heartedly alive. Nor is this strange; the

Vedic Guru's function was obviously altered in a fundamental way, once writing became general and manuscripts easily available. It is as if in Britain the great bardic schools of Ireland and Wales had struggled on through the millennia, trying to keep alive skills and methods made redundant by the alphabet and, later, by printing. A rearguard action has of course been fought over the centuries – the *Mahabharata* condemns to hell those who write down the Vedas; and when I was in India I heard the story of an American who, refused by one teacher, learned the Vedas under another, then returned to the first in order to show off his skill in recitation. But the old man shook his head – the matter was not so simple, because as he said 'When I recite them they are the Vedas – when you recite them, they are not!'

In this way, then, a vestige of the pure strain has been preserved. At the same time the teaching of the Vedas led to the teaching of secular subjects like grammar, logic, rhetoric, mathematics. Beyond all this, however, there seems always to have been another strain of teacher, philosophic, solitary, ascetic. Asceticism has a history which goes back at least as far as the period of the *Rig-Veda*, in which *munis* are referred to (a name still used for holy men, particularly among the Jains). They seem to have worn soiled, yellow robes and their hair long – thus presenting an appearance very like that of today's wandering *sadhus*; they were said to be *vatarashana*, which has been translated as 'one who has only the air for his girdle'. It seems likely that these holy men, as they grew older in experience and perhaps reputation, gathered one or two congenial disciples, who accompanied them either on their wanderings or to the hermitages where they spent their time. And of course for this relationship there existed the model of the perhaps more orthodox Vedic Guru, by whom many of these people will themselves have been taught throughout their childhood.

As writing altered the importance of that mechanical tuition which is what the Guru had had to offer hitherto, so a change came over the basic philosophy of Hinduism. Between the Vedas and the Upanishads,<sup>1</sup> the earliest of which may date from around the sixth century BC, there is a shift in emphasis from, put loosely, man to God. Where the Vedas assure those following their precepts a rich, comfortable and successful life and define those terms in a completely mundane way, the Upanishads tell us (and I

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<sup>1</sup> Properly speaking, they are all Vedas. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference – the *Rig-Veda* and others, as we have seen, are not considered human in origin, the Upanishads are recognised to have been written down. But all the scriptures of course interconnect, Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, the later Puranas and so on.

quote the *Chandogya Upanishad*, one of the earliest), ‘Verily, this whole world is Brahman, from which he comes forth, without which he will be dissolved, and in which he breathes. Tranquil, one should meditate on it.’ The *Mundaka Upanishad* says, ‘He, verily, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself.’

Thus there appears a new monism. Where the Vedas offer a multitude of gods, and favour one or another in different hymns and sections, the Upanishads offer the idea that everything is One and the One is Brahman. Attached to this is the idea of , often translated as ‘fate’ but more properly the law of cause and effect – what we do now has repercussions later, and that ‘later’ means not, as in the Vedas, later in this life, in which we will be punished by sickness or an absence of cattle but in the later reincarnated lives which our souls shall live. The *Chandogya Upanishad* assures us that if we behave well we shall be reborn into one of the three higher castes, ‘but those whose conduct has been evil will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a hog or the birth of a Candala,’ (the lowest of low, one whose mother was a Brahmin and whose father a Shudra).

All this formed the basis for the philosophy promulgated by Shankara in the eighth century and called *advaita vedanta*, the philosophy of ‘non dualism’ which remains perhaps the most important strain in Hindu thought. Buddhism had for centuries before been India’s dominant religion and Shankara was the leader of the Hindu revival which eventually drove it out. His ideas bear a clear Buddhist tinge, and even at the time he was occasionally accused of being a fellow-traveller.

The most important element in his thinking was perhaps his concept of *maya*, which he said was the condition of illusion in which humans live, and in which they see differentiation when there is none. Everything is Brahman; therefore to make distinctions between one individual or another, or one thing and another, or an individual or a thing, must be mistaken. If we could only perceive reality as it should be perceived, we would realize that it was illusory; because we do not, we react to it in the wrong way. His analogy, used again and again since, was that of the rope lying beside the road at evening which the passing traveller perceives as a snake. His response is absurd, because he has not understood what was in front of him. If we understood what was in front of us, we would be spared absurdity. What is in front of us is Brahman, the Absolute – not a personified God, but Being, the ultimate It of the universe – and our duty is to realize this. The result of such a realization will be that we and Brahman will appear to merge – ‘appear’, because we and Brahman always have been merged, but we have not understood this and acted upon the assumption of a separation. Once we learn, by meditation, by going into ourselves, that the spiritual part of



ourselves and Brahman are actually indivisible, that 'I' is a meaningless word – once we have learned this, realized it utterly, then we will be able to break the death-birth-death cycle and merge with the Absolute. We shall have attained *moksha*.

In other words, what separates us from liberation, from breaking the bonds of this illusion, is our ignorance. Knowledge, or *jnāna*, is the way we can achieve self-realization and the final union with Brahman. The implication in this, of course, is that we need a teacher. The Guru has as his prime function the guidance of his disciple in the *jnana yga*, the way of knowledge. However, truth is discrimination between real and unreal and this can only be achieved in the state of ecstasy in which it becomes directly realized. Because of this, the Guru teaches not merely that right discrimination by which the ultimate truth might be determined, but also those states of the mind in which it can be experienced at first hand.

A later strain in Hindu practice, which although it seems to conflict with *jnana yoga* is often practised in conjunction with it (Asia is not hung up on 'either-or' configurations in the way the West is; opposites are reconciled without any great problem) is the way of devotion, *bhakti yoga*. In this, love of God reaches an absolute pitch, an intensity at which all imperfections are burned away. The philosophy which sustains this attitude is not usually, like *advaita vedanta*, monistic, arguing instead that when the soul achieves its highest state, it joins with God, but does not become one with Him. The chief *bhakti* philosopher was, perhaps, Ramanuja, who with his *vishisht-advaita* or qualified non-dualism tried to show how the soul was separate from yet totally dependent on Brahman. The world, he said, was not illusion, but real, spun out of the very fabric of God as a spider spins a web out of its body. Souls were of the substance of Brahman, too, yet separate, as sparks are a part of fire, yet not the fire itself. In liberation, the soul achieves Brahman rather in the same way as the Christian soul achieves God in the doctrine of the mystic marriage. But, as one *bhakti* Guru said to me, 'When you reach the intoxication level of love, you are God.' In the end, the distinction between monism and this form of dualism becomes so fine as to be almost invisible to any but theologians. In any case, such divisions suggest a doctrinal rigidity not actually met with in Hinduism.

There was a great *bhakti* revival in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, led by such holy men as Chaitanya, Kabir, Madhva and Vallabha, and certainly since then this has been perhaps the most important of the elements which go to make up the Guru-disciple relationship. By focussing his emotions on the God-realized figure of the Guru, the disciple is able to 'merge' with him. In this, since the Guru is consciously a part of Brahman, has realized, that is, the Brahman within himself, the disciple is merging

himself too with that great Absolute. The Guru in this way becomes the visible part of God, that which gives both reality and limit to the concept of divinity. At the same time, he remains a teacher, setting out the tasks which the disciple has to do in order to achieve spiritual perfection. And he is an example proving that these tasks, this devotion, lead to a successful end, since he himself has passed along this way in order to reach his present high condition.

The discipline by which the disciple is expected to achieve self-realization is called his *sadhana* (hence those following such a path are called *sadhakas*) and this is usually prescribed by the Guru. It normally includes *hatha yoga*, the *asanas* or positions of which are familiar to the West, where they are taught simply as ‘Yoga’; *japas*, which is the repetition of a name of God, or of a *mantra*, sometimes for hours or even days on end; the reading of sacred texts; meditation; it goes without saying that the full-time disciple is expected to eat frugally and a vegetarian diet, sleep with the minimum of comfort and for the shortest time possible, eschew money and all worldly connections, and remain totally celibate. The disciple follows this routine because he trusts, he loves, his Guru, and as a result surrenders to him. Indeed, in this surrender lies the kernel of the relationship. Once you have given yourself up, God fills the resultant emptiness. How do you give yourself up? By surrender to the Guru. Once you have achieved this, everything else becomes possible to you. It is for this reason that potential disciples may spend years in searching for the Guru right for them, the one man at whose feet they may unload the staggering burden of the Self.

What are the rewards this strenuous and difficult process offers? First, the trance states it induces, the condition of *samadhi*, in which that unity of all phenomena of which the texts speak may be directly experienced. There are varieties of this state, distinguished mainly by the route used to reach them, partly by the depth and length of time of the experience. *Jnana yoga* leads to *nirvikalpa samadhi*, and this, if it is sustained, becomes *Sahaja samadhi*, believed by some to be the highest state. Others may achieve *samprajnata samadhi*, a state in which by concentrating on an object, all else ceases, it seems, to exist; in this way the distinction between deity and devotee may be maintained. There is, however, a further stage, *asamprajnata samadhi*, in which even that object ceases to exist for the person in meditation; according to Patanjali and others, it is this which is the highest state of trance. In *Indian Culture* by Atreya, Chatterji and Danielou<sup>2</sup> the authors describe *samadhi* as ‘a unique experience of objectless,

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<sup>2</sup> Published by Universal Book. Stationery Co., New Delhi.

thoughtless and differentless blissful existence’ and quote a *yogi* who speaks of the ‘immeasurably delightful and cool effulgence of millions of suns in which there is no longing for anything.’ This kind of experience, which many aspirants begin to have quite early on in their *sadhana*, naturally not only confirms them in their beliefs, but also reinforces their determination to continue.

Beyond that, of course, lies self-realization itself, the bursting out into the mystic uplands after the appalling and exhausting climb those steep slopes demand. Shri Nisargadatte Maharaj – a Guru who sits unpretentiously in his small hall at the top of a metal stair in a Bombay back-street – has written<sup>3</sup> ‘I am no more an individual. There is nothing to limit my being now .... My present experience of the world as the divine expression is not for any profit nor for loss, but is the pure, simple, natural flow of beatific consciousness .... It is the unique, blissful experience of the primal unity .... He that once meditated on bliss and peace is himself the ocean of bliss and peace.’

All this explains what the Guru brings one – it does not explain who he is or how one finds him. Kabir, in the fifteenth century, told us why he was needed – ‘In the midst of the highest heaven there is a shining light; he who has no Guru cannot reach the palace; he only will reach it who is under the guidance of a true Guru.’ But who is ‘a true Guru’? In some ways, the picture becomes very confused when one looks at it closely. Some people, for example, say that anything that helps one in one’s spiritual progress is a Guru. And this is true, if one thinks that ‘guru’ has been translated ‘one who enlightens.’ Then there are hereditary Gurus. In some cases, for instance among the Vallahacharyas, all the male members of a family are Gurus the moment they are born; in others the old Guru appoints a successor who may be his son, or perhaps his cousin or brother, but who is never anyone from outside the family. And of course such groups are only following the tradition of the ancient, Vedic Guru, who inherited his *shishya varga*, his group of students and disciples, from his Guru father, just as they inherited him from their fathers. Then there are sect-Gurus, men who are leaders of a defined group and who often claim spiritual descent from a founding deity, known then as the *adi-Guru*. Then there are *mahants*, the heads of monasteries, who perform the functions of a Guru. And it must not be forgotten that these categories are not mutually exclusive; at the same time, any holy man, once approached, may accept someone who comes to him as his disciple.

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<sup>3</sup> In ‘Self-Knowledge and Self-Realization’, a pamphlet issued by his ashram in Bombay.

These last may indeed be among that highest level of Teachers, the *sad-Gurus* – the ‘teachers of reality’, as that term has been translated. These are the Masters whom we in the West think of as ‘real’ Gurus. Often they come from poor families, they manifest their holiness early, they refuse to marry – it may be because they refuse that their sanctity first becomes apparent – they take to the roads of India, making their way in a pilgrimage sometimes decades long from one holy man or holy place to another. Or they may settle early, at the feet of a great teacher, taking over from him when he dies. Or they may decide to remain in one place, from which, little by little, the fame of their holiness and, perhaps, their miraculous powers, begins to spread about the land. In this way, they draw their disciples to them, they bring to their feet great crowds, some of whom will accept them as their Guru, others of whom have come only for the *darshan* of the great man – that view of him which the Hindu feels will enable him to draw up into himself some particle of a saint’s or leader’s virtue.

Particular followers of a Guru may decide that they should renounce the world and serve this saint and God. Most, however, will remain week-end devotees, travelling as often as possible to the *ashram* of the Guru, drawing on his wealth of spiritual power, staying perhaps in the guest-house the *ashram* provides, then returning to the city to continue their normal, secular lives. They will be no less a devotee of their Guru than those who, in ochre robes, stay at his side and minister to his needs twenty-four hours a day. As one secular devotee of a Guru put it to me, ‘There are two categories, that of the householder and that of the renounced. The ultimate goal is the same for both – but they are in a better position to attain it.

In choosing one’s Guru, there often comes a moment of recognition, or of something perhaps a little sharper, a moment as emotional as that of ‘falling in love at first sight’ might be for us. Once one has had such an experience, there is rarely any going back on it; one has found the Teacher one has, consciously or not, been looking for. One *chela*, whose Guru was an ascetic who had not lain down or spoken for a dozen years, described their first meeting for me. ‘I was staying in a small cave near here, and so I came to know that there was a holy man living here. I came to see him, and the first time I saw him it was as though I had been thirsty all that time and now the thirst had left me. I felt very peaceful. That is how I knew I had met my Guru.’

Or the devotee of a female Guru, Godavari Mata, herself a woman: ‘Somebody said, “*Mataji* has come”. I turned round just to see – and at that very moment something in me .... I don’t know, I can’t explain that experience. Something sort of .... I just surrendered. She was at that time

very beautiful, even physically .... Really I can't explain what had happened to me. I was like one in a dream.'

Sometimes the recognition is in the other direction – it is the Guru who picks out the disciple. One devotee was being introduced to the Guru by his brother, when the Guru said, 'I know him, I have known him since long.' And when the astonished newcomer asked how that was possible, the Guru said, 'I have known you since your birth, during many births. I have always been with you.'

At this time the Guru may give proofs of heightened powers – he may give advice on some problem about which the devotee is worrying but which he has not yet discussed with his new Master. In one case the Guru came to his prospective follower on the first day, after a period of silent meditation had been passed by the aspirant with as little result as always, and told him that the *mantra* he was using to concentrate on was too long. Impressed in this way – 'How did he know what my *mantra* was?' – the man became a life-long follower.

In this and other ways, both Guru and disciple are tested. The Guru has the right at any time to send away a would-be disciple; conversely, although it may be frowned upon, it is understood that the disciple who makes no progress under a particular Guru may strike out to find himself another. In making these decisions, of course, the Guru as the enlightened man has certain advantages. As one Guru told me, 'As soon as a *shishya* comes and sits before a Guru, he sees the vibrations that emit from that *shishya*, and because he is more powerful, he knows what type of a *shishya* he is.'

Nevertheless, it is the disciple who, in a curious way, has the whip-hand; if he does not make an approach to the Guru, if he does not decide that the Guru is the man who can lead him to self-realization, then whatever the Guru may think of himself and his spiritual ability, he will be left without a follower. Only when the would-be disciple has made his decision can the Guru exercise what is his prerogative, the acceptance or rejection of the newcomer. Acceptance may then be formalised by *diksha*, initiation. Within a sect or a monastic order, this is naturally done with ceremony and ritual. On the *ashram*, however, initiation may be very informal, may involve no spoken word at all. Indeed, this kind of initiation is often considered the highest of all: distinction is made between the *diksha* which is *bahya*, external, and *abhyantari*, which is internal and most subtly effected. There are in this subtle initiation three further categories, *sparshi*, where the Guru simply touches the disciple, *caksush*, which is by a glance, and *manasi*, which is by thought alone. Another classification is similar – *sbakti*, in which the Guru's spiritual power enters the disciple directly, even when they may be physically separated; *sambhavi*, in which there is some contact,

a touch perhaps, an exchange of words; and *anavi*, in which there is a ritual of some kind and the devotee is given a *mantra*.

What initiation proves is the mutual acceptance, one of the other, by Guru and disciple. What it does is to pass the divine power of the Guru into the disciple. It has been said that the Guru-disciple relationship is not a teaching, it is a transmission, and with initiation of whatever sort, but particularly perhaps of the silent, subtle kind, such a transmission is given a channel it can use. From then on, the process of self-realization can continue. For, as one Guru put it to me, 'The Guru and the *shishya*, they are like two kernels in one jack-fruit, one raw, the other ripe. The raw one wants to be ripe; the ripe one is ripe and wants nothing more. While the raw one feels different it will continue to demand, to want something. But there is no difference – it is all jack-fruit, all the same stuff. The difference is only felt by the unripe.' Once the disciple has been accepted and initiated, that ripening process can begin. The intensity of the subsequent relationship cannot be exaggerated. For the disciple, the Guru is divine. He is, he must be believed to be self-realized and thus essentially indivisible from Brahman, not only in the general way in which this is true of everyone, but in the particular, direct way which follows upon the destruction of all the barriers of illusion. Not only that, he is visible, manifestly there, the Guide on the path. Again and again the devotees of one Guru or another – *sad*-Guru, sectarian Guru, hereditary Guru – said to me, 'Guru is greater than God, because he leads me to God.'

To illustrate the depth of the relationship, here are the words of a Swaminaryana monk: 'The invisible presence of the Guru is like a shelter that continues. He is the real liberator. Everything depends on him, when or whether he wants to raise us up .... The ultimate stage will come when we realize his presence all the time ....' and a secular follower of the same Guru told me, 'If he tells me to stay with him, then I have to. If he tells me to renounce the world, then I have to. It is his orders which mould our lives.' Or another devotee, an engineering student, speaking of his quite different Guru, 'There is no comparison between this and any relationship I have known. I feel that he is perfect. Disagreement can never be possible, you see, because the situation as Swamiji analyses it can never be wrong.' It is by way of such an intensity of feeling that the teachings of the Guru, or the power of the Guru, are transferred to the disciple. And for this reason much of what passes between Guru and *shishya* does so in silence. The Guru sits, often on the *gadi*, the padded throne, while before him, men and women separate, his followers, face him. They greet him by prostrating themselves, they offer a gift – fruit, a little money – then take their places in the assembly. If they have a question, they will ask it; otherwise, they simply

watch him, or close their eyes and go into meditation. For long stretches, the hall in which these people are meeting their Teacher is absolutely silent – as one American disciple put it, ‘He’s got like great teats all over him and we just suck and suck that heavy goodness out of him.’

It is, because of the essential privacy of this relationship, because it is always unique, tailored for and by the personalities of one Guru, one disciple, very difficult to define in very strict and formal terms exactly what a Guru is and does. I have evolved a partial definition of the Guru; that is, I have isolated four conditions any two of which must be met by anyone claiming to be a spiritual Guru (obviously those teaching dance and music come into a different category). These conditions are: (a) the Guru must be able to achieve the state of *samadhi*; (b) he must be able to teach or transfer to others the ability to achieve *samadhi* (this as the visible sign of a high level of self-realization); (c) he is the established successor of his own Guru before him; (d) he has the right and the power to give initiation. The great *sad*-Guru on his own *ashram* will meet all four of these conditions; the hereditary Guru of a *bhakti* cult might only meet the last two. But two at least must be met for someone to be considered a Guru. A fifth condition, that of deep learning in the Hindu scriptures, will be almost universally met by Gurus, yet may not be by some who seem to have achieved a very high spiritual plane without experiencing a conventional education. Such proficiency, however, will generally be expected by would-be disciples.

It is plain that explanations for some of the intensity with which this relationship is entered into must be looked for outside it, in Indian society as a whole. When one does so, one sees that a highly-repressive puritanism is very widespread in India, which holds down not merely sexuality, but all emotion. Public tenderness between husband and wife is, for example, considered indecent, and any acknowledged feelings of affection between, say, an engaged couple are unthinkable. The vast majority of marriages are, in any case, arranged. Most people’s lives are, therefore, emotionally very restricted. They are weighed down by the demands of duty towards their often widely-ramified families; their circle of friends is limited by class, caste and wealth; their opportunities in life restricted by the general poverty of the country and the commands of their parents. To these last they remain entirely subservient for the whole of their lives, living into middle-age with restrictions the Westerner has thrown off before he is into his twenties. In this situation, the relationship with the Guru is one of the very few in which the Indian may be respectably swept off his feet by his emotions. In many of these cases it seems to me that what has happened is a redirection of love, a love rebuffed hitherto by the many barriers convention puts in its way, either by prohibiting its expression or by demanding it as a duty.

Nevertheless, it is clear that for perhaps thousands of years men and women have been led to some kind of realization, some kind of spiritual development, by the personality and techniques of successive generations of Gurus. The institution is not, of course, unique; in many parts of Asia, both further West and further East, similar Masters teach their disciples the details of similar routes. (Zen and Sufi both, as a matter of fact, seem more interesting to me, since they are more aware that man is also partly intellect, that he must be taught to think in new ways, that his expectations, even of the Master-aspirant relationship, should be broken down before something useful can emerge; much of what passes between *shishya* and Guru seems to me to do so by rote). If now the West is showing a greater and greater interest in these institutions, it seems to me to be because we have reached the end of an era in the history of ideas. Scientific materialism seems to be at its last gasp. We are watching with despair the world it has created, or tried to show us, a world of insane weaponry, of irrelevant endeavour, of pointless experimentation. We go to the Moon because we can, not because we must. Scientists work impartially on cancer cures or the virus of bubonic plague. Sociologists and psychologists settle with the same objectivity to the causes of poverty as they do to the methods of selling detergents. Behaviourists maim a million animals in order to prove what their very determination disproves of itself, that living is a matter of learned muscle-response. Land, sea and air become polluted. The world's natural resources drain away. Ideologues confront each other, those sad, threatening push-buttons under their fingers. From such a world, we are beginning to recoil; even scientists are asking whether an undifferentiated curiosity is really man's highest and most hallowed attribute. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle showed that even in physics the observer cannot exclude himself from his observations. Man is having to rediscover his inevitable presence, is having to reckon with himself in the particular; generalizations will no longer entirely do. If a new era of subjectivity is thus being ushered in, it may be that somewhere in the Guru-*shishya* relationship there are elements which will prove useful to us, that from this intense and alien institution we may yet have much to learn.