

## Gurus and Chelas

by E.T. Sturdy  
and a reply by Annie Besant

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[Page 3] THE question of the relationship between the teacher and disciple in eastern countries has occupied the minds of many western Theosophists. This relationship will be better understood when it is explained that there is no one system or attitude maintained, and that the position varies with nearly every group of teachers and disciples.

The important questions which a disciple must solve are: (1) In regard to such and such a man has he knowledge ? (2) Will he use it unselfishly ? (3) Will there be a personal affinity between him and me ? Then in some schools (4) Can I have such trust in him as to surrender myself entirely into his hands and obey without any hesitation what I am told to do ? It is on account of this latter question that western students have found difficulty in understanding how a man could come into association with his guru.

On the other hand the guru has questions to ask himself in regard to the chela (1) What [Page 4] is his motive ? (2) What is his stage of knowledge ? (3) How will he use further knowledge ? (4) Is he to be trusted ? The solution of these questions depends upon the development of the guru and whether he can see beyond the evidence which is given to the ordinary man, but even with the highest it is doubtful whether complete certainty can be made.

The whole question then resolves itself into one of mutual knowledge and trust in the most reasonable and philosophical schools the association begins gradually. It commences by a disciple going to a teacher for advice and instruction upon some point. It may be a small affair and even a promise of secrecy is not taken from him. Then other philosophical doubts arise and he finds answers and explanations which are satisfactory to him in his guru. Meanwhile the life and character of the teacher come more and more under the observation of the disciple and we will suppose he finds these exemplary from his standpoint. He has so far found that the advice and instruction given him have always been sound; thereby his confidence has increased. His guru has never shown that he had any motive other than a purely unselfish desire to benefit. By this his reverence and affection have grown. He has not asked idly, he has been an earnest seeker; he has tried to act by what [Page 5] he has been taught and what he has been able to accept. The teacher too has observed the chela, has studied his character and judged his trustworthiness. This process may have taken months or years. It cannot be hurried by *faith*; each step has to be taken in the light of knowledge, not in the dark. If we take vast precautions in the entrusting of our mere self, how much more should a man discern and proceed warily, where so great a matter as the guidance of his very life is concerned.

At length the disciple has reached a point where he asks a question not to be solved from texts. Hitherto he has been helped in solving questions and doubts for which the teachings of various scriptures sufficed. Now, by his own perseverance and the guidance he has received he is brought face to face with

a question which comes under a different category. The guru has received this knowledge from *his* guru, under the condition of handing it down to worthy disciples only, and even then only under the same conditions under which he received it. He may or may not, at first, permit his disciples so to communicate it in their turn. After long experience they may do so. Hence arises the necessity of the first promise. It is merely one of secrecy. The guru has judged of his disciple and trusts him. He knows that long pledges are useless, for men will [Page 6] pledge themselves blindly to anything in their hunger to gratify their curiosity, or to gain what they suppose are valuable secrets for their own ends. The guru bases his actions on his knowledge and experience. The chela does likewise with such as he has. There is no mystery, no mere hypotheses, no straining of faith. And so time goes on, and the respect and love of the chela grow as he is able to see deeper and deeper into his guru's qualifications and character. He receives instruction as difficulties occur in his growth. No artificial pledges are needed. *The conditions of holding such knowledge are taught him; he accepts it under those conditions.* He does not receive it until he is judged fit. He knows when he fails that he brings upon himself inevitable results or karmic punishment.

A man instinctively obeys him whom he has found always right and always disinterested. His obedience springs from the very bottom of his heart. Any pledge of obedience would be a false prop and a sacrilege. How can he disobey him whom he has come so much to love and reverence ? Great indeed must be the inducement before he does so and great indeed the disaster.

It is not difficult to understand the enthusiasm and love of a man who has beaten with weary brain and heart against the wall which [Page 7] bounds our ordinary knowledge when he finds someone who gives him even a grain of the knowledge which goes beyond. He needs no artificial props to keep him to his faithfulness. And so, in his love and confidence, if he bursts into expression some day of his ever-living devotion to every expressed wish of his guru, it is because love has grown to that extent within him that words come as a relief.

His guru accepts it, understanding how it has grown; he never asked for it. It is love which has caused love to grow.

The Eternal Ātman is the true Initiator, the true Guru. Nothing must eventually come between the aspirant and That. In his guru he must worship That ; in himself That. His love and devotion must not fall into a worship of form or feature or abode. His guru is to him an expression of truth higher than himself. It is as that he worships him; but he distinguishes between the vessel and its content.

And so progress, bounded and assured in every direction by acquired knowledge, is made.

The association between guru and chela does not cease with death if both are sufficiently advanced. If the chela is not sufficiently advanced, he may unknowingly receive much from his guru, and may later learn to recognize its source. [Page 8]

Between the relationship as described and the lowest forms of fanatical devotion of the ignorant to those who know little, the gradations are innumerable. It is no uncommon thing to hear a man talk of his guru as if he were an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent being, who could do anything for the chela that

he chose, who is always guiding and watching over him at any time or anywhere. To this guru he has a pledge of absolute obedience and devotion. He seeks instruction upon every little detail of life which he carefully fulfils; or if he does not, he feels guilty of a sin, like the devotee of a personal God. He in the first place became a chela with very little previous knowledge of his guru. It was not in him then, or since, to have much discrimination. He thought he saw a very great Yogi who would lead him to Moksha, and he caught on at once. He may some day alter his opinion, in which case he breaks his pledge and goes elsewhere.

These pledges of absolute obedience and surrender to the will of a guru are fortunately rare. The chief condition is secrecy. *All the rest is part of the conditions of the knowledge given.* Such, for instance, as continence, abstinence, from certain foods, and so on, the breaking of which conditions, once they are known, produce their own inevitable disasters. Hence a man may [Page 9] receive knowledge from one man for a time and afterward go to another, and so to a third, fourth, fifth, etc; but he should remain under the tutelage of only one at a time, and where Yoga is being practiced, this is especially necessary to prevent confusion, if for no other reason. Of course, where a guru can continue or wishes to continue teaching various things, the chela may never change; but the guru himself may often refer his disciple to another guru.

In a country like India, where a large number of people are more or less intently bent upon the search for gurus, the cases of deception are constant and numerous; and cases frequently occur where the rascal masquerading as a Yogi manages to obtain very considerable sums of money from people whose credulity or whose greed for acquiring knowledge outweighs their discrimination.

The belief in the possibility of Yoga and the capacity of man to rise by it to the noblest and most sublime conditions is so innate in the Indian mind, there is so much natural reverence in the people, that some centuries of imposture, which grows yearly more brazen-faced, have done little to decrease the reverence for the orange-red garment. This is also partly to be accounted for by the undoubted fact that many men of blameless life and great knowledge still continue to be [Page 10] found in India, wandering as mendicants. It has become a custom for men to wander far and wide, through cities, and in wild places, hunting for a guru to guide and instruct them. Whether this was always so is much to be doubted. With the decline of the search for true knowledge in India, those in whose custody it is have withdrawn more and more from the outer life of the world, and the difficulty in finding these custodians, no doubt, serves as a fair test to prove the determination of the seeker, whether his motive be pure or selfish. Others, remembering the failure of multitudes of those who wandered and sought, make no such effort, believing either that the guru will find them when their time has come or that there are no true Gurus, Yogis, or Mahātmās now existing.

This latter class is an increasing one, and its growth is no doubt, assisted by the Agnostic influence of Western civilisation and also by a consideration of the vast numbers of men of small learning, beggars and idlers who are indifferently called Sannyāsi, Bairāgi, Swāmi, Yogi, Mahātmā, Paramhansa, etc., as the speaker may consider fitting. To hear a man say that he met *several Mahātmās*, at a fair or festival sounds strange to Western Theosophists who have used that term in the original sense to signify those who stand where humanity merges into [Page 11] Deity. The meaning of the narrator was that he had met several men in garb of ascetics who gave him a more or less favorable impression.

It will be seen from what has been said that chelaship, like every other wise institution, must be founded upon knowledge, experience and judgment. If these have to be exercised to the very highest degree where the chela comes into direct communication with his guru, whose knowledge and power, if he has any discrimination, will in time have become known to him, how much more is it imperative upon him to be ever watchful and discriminating in the case of those who, having little or no further knowledge than himself, claim to teach through being in communication with beings whose knowledge in regard to things here is, by the conception we have of them, almost infallible. He can but fall back upon his own reason and his own light as to how to act in any emergency that may arise; he can take no directions from a source he does not know, through an agency he sees little, or not at all, different from himself. He might as well have remained under the dominion of a priest, as tread such treacherous ground.

What infinite claims have been made to being in communication with God and with superior beings ! Not by deliberate impostors, not by men [Page 12] and women of impure or selfish lives; often quite the reverse of this. Perhaps they did evil that good might come of it, leading their fellows upon the path of virtue as they saw it, thinking that through the motive and apparent result the means would be forgiven them. Dire illusion ! A misrepresentation is only a bill drawn at a long date; it will mature after the successes of having *raised the wind* have passed away. Truth cannot be juggled with or put off. Who can know another's heart ? Who can know the springs of action in another, when he has not yet been able to sound the depths of good and evil within himself ?

Or again, the claimant to mediatorship, either with a God, an Angelic Being or a Mahātmā ? for they are all the same as far as the recipient of messages and directions is concerned, may be utterly or partially deceived either by himself or by some masquerading intelligence external to himself.

The Christian who tells you how you will *find Christ* and the mediator who tells you how you will *find your Guru* differ somewhat in their methods, but both begin with *if*, and a long following list of ideal conditions; and therefore as regards proof, so far, both are equal.

The aspirant to chelaship must be tested in the world in every manner. Heavily indeed is [Page 13] he punished for lack of discrimination and for credulity, or for accepting claims and building on them without having probed these to the very bottom. Credulity is punished almost as heavily apparently as lack of heart, and on nothing than this latter can kārmic blows fall heavier. And this is just; for discrimination, straightforward understanding of everything, as far as we can go, and then resisting the temptation to go further and treat hypotheses as facts, or take statements as such, however enticing, is the very root from which knowledge springs.

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## GURUS AND CHELAS

by **Annie Besant**

[In this reprint the Samskrt terms for Teacher and Disciple are retained]

[Page 17] THE importance of the subject taken up by Brother Sturdy in the August (1893) number of *Lucifer*

may well serve as excuse for a return to it, though from a somewhat different standpoint. It should be the advantage of a Theosophical magazine that different opinions can be put forward therein with perfect friendliness and courtesy, so that readers may have the advantage of seeing different sides of a subject, and may thus be enabled to form a more intelligent judgment than can be reached by seeing but one set of dogmatic assertions. The printing of an article with which the editor disagrees naturally implies the right of reply thereto, and the free air of frank discussion is, I think, healthier than the close atmosphere of unchallenged statement.

Bro. Sturdy very properly states in the beginning of his article that there is no one system [Page 18] adopted by all groups of teachers and disciples; and this is a point of some importance, for in the West people are apt to imagine that all Occult Schools stand on the same basis and employ the same methods. This is not so. In India there are many Occult Schools, and the methods employed are as various as the teachers. Students, eager to acquire knowledge and seeking liberation from the cycle of re-births, go to one or to another, and very probably may guide themselves in their choosing by some such process of questioning as that described by Bro. Sturdy; there is no question here of spiritual insight; it is a careful process of ratiocination. The key-note is struck in the sentence:

"If we take vast precautions in the entrusting of our mere self, how much more should a man discern and proceed warily where so great a matter as the guidance of his very life is concerned".

But the kind of precaution we take in selecting a trustee, or in choosing a tutor for our son, has nought in common — and here comes the fundamental difference between Bro. Sturdy and the large class both in the East and West whose views I am endeavoring to represent — with the finding of the Guru by the chela and the recognition by the latter of a *relationship that already exists*. If chelaship means nothing [Page 19] more than the finding of an intellectually advanced man, whose abilities and acquirements you carefully investigate, in order that he may train you intellectually and help you as a European professor helps his students, then I grant that the method proposed is quite in keeping with the object; it is supremely rational and cautious; every precaution is taken on both sides; the teacher scrutinizes the pupil, the pupil scrutinizes the teacher, and if the result be mutually satisfactory, the relation is entered into. The bond is on the plane of intellect; the lower consciousness is the sole arbiter; and in this world of illusion every precaution must be taken against deception on either side.

But is this what is meant by the words Guru and chela? Is the most sacred and sublime of all human relationships nothing more than an intellectual bond, entered into with questions that appear to make the initial stage one of mutual suspicion, to be slowly removed by prolonged knowledge of each other in the physical life? Not so have I been taught, little as I know of these high matters, and the process described by Bro. Sturdy is the complete reversal of all that I have heard as to the methods of the school to which I was introduced by H. P. Blavatsky. For in that school the relationship between Guru and chela is a spiritual one, long [Page 20] before it descends to the plane of the intellect, and the tie has grown so close and strong ere the lower consciousness knows anything about it that when, at last, the lower consciousness begins to realize it, all questioning's become a laughable impossibility. It is not a question of men wandering through cities and in wild places, hunting for a guru to guide and instruct them.

The Guru and the chela have been long working on the spiritual plane of consciousness, the Guru directing, guiding, helping, the chela striving, learning, joyously submissive. On that plane no places are

known; the body, of the chela may be in any land. On that plane no arguments are needed; as the spiritual vision strengthens, the chela sees. He could as soon question his Guru's knowledge, unselfishness, purity, as he could question the light of the sun; his life on the spiritual plane is one of intense devotion to his Guru, to him the representative of spiritual law, of compassion, of divinity. For many a long year his training may proceed, and no gleam of what is passing may have reached the lower consciousness meanwhile he is living in that lower consciousness a pure, restrained, devoted life, aspiring ever towards his (to it) unknown Guru, whom one day he hopes to find. Then dimly he begins to sense, in his moments of highest meditation, a presence [Page 21] lofty and serene, strong and calm, just and compassionate. This dim sensing of something above him quickens his aspirations and stimulates his efforts. The lower consciousness, long purified, begins to respond more swiftly to the impulses of the higher; the veil grows thinner between the lower and the higher, and the dim sensing passes into perfect sight and hearing. More and more the spiritual consciousness penetrates the intellectual, but it comes as master, not as servant, to command, not to submit itself to investigation. And it permeates the lower mind with its own knowledge, fills it with the certainties of its own experience, floods it with the radiance of its own light. Therefore, what the lower mind needs most to fit it for the reception of its spiritual guest is devotion, the longing to rise, the passion to yield itself in perfectest surrender. This done, it has done its part; it has opened all the windows, and the light streams in. Where in all this linked growth comes in the place for questioning's of the Guru: "Has He knowledge ? will He use it unselfishly ? can I trust Him ?" The chela may doubt himself, but never his Guru; he may foolishly despair of himself, but never of his Lord.

"But, then, you make nothing of the intellect," I hear one say; " you open the door to ignorance, to delusion, to superstition". The [Page 22] intellectual has its place in the chela's life, but the intellect may no more aspire to rule the Spirit or to lay down laws for its development, than the body may aspire to rule the intellect. Let the chela study intellectually, that he may be able to serve in the outer world, spreading the truths of Theosophy, removing mental perplexities, solving intellectual problems, scattering the darkness of ignorance. There let him be strong for intellectual conflict, a warrior for the soul's emancipation, strenuous, clear, virile, insistent. But when he enters the inner sanctuary and seeks the light of Spirit, he puts off his intellectual armor, he lays aside his weapons, he clothes himself in trust and devotion, he becomes in gentleness and submission as a little child. Thus have the Wise Ones taught in every century; thus have Their servants learned in every age; and thus I, though but the lowest of Their servants in the outermost court of the Gentiles, thus I, with ignorance-dimmed eyes, have seen.