

THE « GURU » IN HINDU TRADITION

These are days when « Gurus » are very much in demand everywhere. Many individuals take advantage of this situation by presenting themselves as gurus without really possessing the necessary qualifications. A saffron robe, a long beard, a string of sacred beads, a yogic posture, and so on give a person an aura of a guru. But a genuine guru needs much more than these external credentials. Nor is it enough that he possesses deep learning on spiritual matters and close familiarity with the religious scriptures. All these are accessories, but not a substitute for the most essential qualification, namely the inner attainment, the spiritual illumination.

The word *guru* has already become popular in all languages. Originally a Sanskrit term, it indicates any respectable person, a teacher of any subject, a religious leader, or a spiritual guide. In common usage however the word has a predominantly spiritual significance in as much as it stands for the preceptor or spiritual guide, the counsellor and the ideal of an aspirant in his spiritual journey. It is in this sense that some texts interpret *guru* as indicative of the one who reveals the deep and secret Truth (*gūdham*), or of the one who removes from the aspirant the darkness of ignorance and leads him to spiritual illumination¹.

Among the various types of gurus recognised by the Hindu tradition, the most important ones are the *śikṣā-guru* (teaching guru) and the *dikṣā-guru* (initiating guru)². No clear-cut distinction can be made between them because their functions overlap. Yet one may observe that the characteristic duty of the former is instruction. He teaches his pupils the sacred scriptures and the related sciences. The latter, on the other hand, has the specific function of giving initiation to worthy candidates in a spiritual discipline and awakening

¹ Cfr. M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārnava Tantra*, Madras 1973, pp. 118-119.

² Cfr. A. AVALON (Ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, Madras 1960, pp. 536-537.

their inner powers and quickening their spiritual growth and final realization.

Originally the institution of guru was connected with the Vedic studies. The male members of the higher castes had the sacred duty of learning the Vedas under a competent guru who might be the father of the boy or another person who knew the scriptures. The studies began when the boy was about eight years old, and was to last about twelve years. We get a glimpse of how the classes were conducted during the Rigvedic days in the hymn addressed to the frogs, wherein we read: « When one of these repeats the others language, as he who learns the lesson of the teacher, your every limb seems to be growing larger as ye converse with eloquence on the waters »³. The picture of the Vedic class here ironically referred to in the analogy of the collective croaking of the frogs, indicates that the pupils repeated the verses recited by the guru. It was an oral transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. Even after the introduction of writing, oral instruction and the memorizing of the sacred texts remained the most important method of education in ancient India.

Later on the sacred studies became rigidly institutionalised. One was eligible for the study of the Vedas only after having received the sacrament (*samskāra*) of initiation (*upanayana*). Though this institution took shape during the Brāhmaṇa period, and was practically established during the Upanishad period, the rules and regulations that determined its procedure were spelled out meticulously only at the time of the *Grihyasūtras* and *Dharmasūtras*.

The sacrament of initiation (*upanayana*) is the sacred rite whereby a person is purified of all impurities and is spiritually reborn, acquiring thus the rights and duties of a *dvija* (twice-born). The guru (teacher) is the main celebrant of the ceremony, and the selection of a qualified teacher is the grave responsibility of the father of the candidate. The essential parts of the elaborate rite of *upanayana* are the formal reception by the guru of the aspirant, the investiture of the sacred cord and the imparting of the sacred formula, the *gāyatri mantra*. The boy duly prepared, is graciously received by the teacher saying: « Thy heart shall dwell in my heart; my mind thou shalt follow with thy mind; in my word thou shalt rejoice with all thy heart; may Brihaspati join thee to me! To me alone thou shalt adhere. In me thy thoughts shall dwell. Upon me thy veneration shall be bent. When I speak thou shalt be silent »⁴.

³ *Rigveda*, 7, 103, 5.

⁴ *Hiranyakesin Grihyasūtra*, 1, 2, 5, 12.

This formula brings to focus the nature of the new relationship that binds the guru and his disciple to each other. In the course of the ceremony the guru imposes on the candidate the sacred cord made of three strands⁵. Thence forward he proudly wears it as an external mark of a high caste Hindu. Finally the guru solemnly imparts to him the sacred formula, the *gāyatri* *mantra*: « OM! bhūr blunvanah suvah, tat Savitur varenyam, bhārgo devasya dhīmahi, dhīyo yo nah pracodayāt », that is, « OM! He fills the earth, the atmosphere and the heaven; let us meditate on the excellent glory of the divine vivifier Savitṛ; may he enlighten our understanding »⁶. This simple but significant formula underlines the fact that the prime business of a Vedic student is to stimulate and develop the understanding, for obtaining which the divine light is indispensable. The imparting of the *gāyatri* constitutes the initiation into the study of the Vedas. From that moment the pupil is bound to repeat the formula at least 108 times everyday.

The *upanayana* marked the beginning of the stage of life (āśrama) called *brahmacarya*, that is, that of a Vedic student⁷. It was a period of rigorous discipline and assiduous study of the sacred texts; a veritable novitiate indeed. All the family ties of the student were suspended for the time being; he was incorporated into the family of the guru. It was a residential system of education in the full sense of the term. The pupil found both home and education in the *gurukula*, the guru's house. The guru had a personal care of the disciple in all matters throughout the period of his education. A total and implicit submission to the guru was demanded from the disciple. A glance at the code of conduct of the disciple in relation to his guru will shed ample light on the nature of the guru-disciple relationship envisaged by the Hindu lawgivers of old.

During his stay in the house of the guru, the disciple should do everything possible to be pleasing and serviceable to his guru. He should always behave modestly and respectfully in the guru's presence. He is advised to consider the guru as the very image of God himself. « He shall approach his teacher with the same reverence as a deity, without telling idle stories, attentive and listening eagerly to his words »⁸. He shall never pronounce the name of the guru without adding an honorific title. « Let him not answer or

⁵ *Manu*, 2, 44.

⁶ *Rigveda*, 3, 62, 10.

⁷ Hinduism proposes an ideal programme of life dividing it into four stages of progressive spiritual development: *Brahmacarya* or the stage of a Vedic student, *Gārhastya* or family life, *Vānaprastya* or hermitical life, and *San-nyāsa* or complete renunciation.

⁸ *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1, 2, 6, 13; *Manu*, 2, 226.

converse with (his teacher) reclining on a bed, nor sitting, nor eating, nor standing, nor with an averted face. Let him do (that) standing up, if his teacher is seated, advancing towards him when he stands, going to meet him if he advances, and running after him when he runs, going (round) to face (the teacher) if his face is averted, approaching him if he stands at a distance, but bending towards him if he lies on a bed, and if he stands in a lower place »⁹. Every morning he should respectfully salute the guru by embracing his feet. « A student shall occupy a seat and a couch lower (than those of his teacher), shall rise before (him) and retire to rest after (him) »¹⁰. He shall avoid in the presence of his guru « covering his throat, crossing his legs, leaning (against a wall or the like and) stretching out his feet, (as well as) spitting, laughing, yawning, cracking the joints of the fingers »¹¹. « Everyday he shall put his teacher to bed after having washed his (teacher's) feet and after having rubbed him »¹². He himself shall retire to rest only after having received the guru's permission.

The guru however has been warned against playing the despot and taking advantage of the submission of the disciple. He is exhorted to treat the disciple with love and affection: « Loving him like his own son, and full of attention, he shall teach him the sacred science, without hiding anything in the whole law. And he shall not use him for his own purpose to the detriment of his studies, except in times of distress »¹³.

Thus, the earliest gurus of Hindu tradition were the custodians of the sacred lore and the protagonists of the traditional system of education of ancient India. While paying maximum attention to the faithful transmission of the Vedas, they cared also about the moral and intellectual formation of their disciples. However, they were first and foremost *śikṣā guru* or teaching gurus because their essential duty was teaching. They were also called *śravāṇa guru*, that is, the gurus from whom one heard the sacred Truth.

In course of time Hinduism underwent various changes. New ideals and attitudes regarding the life of man on earth and beyond came to be formulated and pursued. As scriptural studies attracted less and less people, the Brahmanic gurus of the above description became more and more a rarity. The inner realization of one kind or another became the main concern of many. Various ascetic and

⁹ *Manu*, 2, 195-197.

¹⁰ *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, 2 ,21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 14-15.

¹² *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1, 2, 6, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 8, 25-26.

esoteric disciplines, later crystallized into different schools of Yoga, like Karma-yoga, Jñāna-yoga, Bhakti-yoga, Rāja-yoga, Haṭha-yoga, Tantra-yoga, and so on appeared on the Indian scene. Here too gurus were pivotal. All without exception underlined the importance of a guru, and the Tantric tradition has been particularly emphatic on this matter.

The guru in this context embodies the highest ideal proposed by the school or sect which he represents. One who intends to follow successfully any of these spiritual paths, has to seek the help of a competent guru. The guru-disciple relationship here envisaged is different from the Brahmanic pattern, because the disciple is not normally supposed to be living with the guru, still the basic spirit and attitudes inculcated by the old system are strongly insisted upon. The disciple should cherish deep faith and trust in his guru and humble submission to him. The guru in his turn gives the disciple initiation into the spiritual path and guides him along his progress. Such gurus are called *dikṣā guru*, that is, the guru who initiates. They are also called *mantra guru* in as much as the initiation generally implies the imparting of a *mantra* (sacred formula) to the disciple. Here we are mainly concerned with these gurus.

The Credentials of an Ideal Guru

Though there seems to be no dearth of gurus in India and elsewhere in the world, it is far from easy to find gurus who would satisfy the accepted description of an authentic one. The scriptures themselves make no secret of the fact that many are the gurus who rob the disciples of their wealth, but rare are the gurus who confer spiritual illumination on them¹⁴. The tradition demands a very high spiritual perfection from a guru. He should be a living illustration of the highest ideal envisaged by his school or sect. As there are many schools and sects and currents of thought in the Hindu fold, the picture of an ideal guru will be correspondingly varied. It would be practically impossible, even superfluous, to try to individualize them here. We may attempt to offer a general idea of the qualities to be possessed by a genuine guru.

The guru is, in the first place, a representative of a particular sect or school and as such doesn't claim to be teaching anything in his own name, but transmitting faithfully the original doctrine handed down from time immemorial by the very first guru of the

¹⁴ Cfr. M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārṇava Tantra*, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

school in question through an uninterrupted succession of gurus and disciples. The guru in his turn has been the disciple of another guru and should always foster towards his own guru profound respect and devotion. The humble acknowledgement of his indebtedness to earlier gurus is regarded as a necessary credential of an authentic guru. Hence even when novelties are introduced and innovations made on the traditional teachings, the guru tries to trace them all from the ancient sources. In short, he considers himself the custodian of his school rather than its founder or reformer.

The Vedantic tradition, then, specifies the other qualifications of a true guru under the following heads: he should be *śrotriya* (versed in scriptures), *avrjina* (sinless), *akāmāhata* (desireless), and *Brahmanīṣṭa* (established in Brahman)¹⁵.

The scriptures are accepted as the deposit of eternal, infallible truth; they are the ultimate authority regarding the transcendental Truth which the guru experiences in his spiritual enlightenment and transmits in his human intercourse. Naturally, therefore, the guru must be versed in the scriptures. But the knowledge required of him is not that of a critic or a scholar. The guru need not necessarily be an intellectual who can analytically examine and critically evaluate the purport of the scriptural passages. He must, on the contrary, be one who has really digested the true spirit and message of the scriptures. The great Ramakrishna Paramahamsa could scarcely read and write, and yet he was acclaimed as a perfect guru, precisely because he had assimilated the authentic spirit of the scriptures. As a matter of fact, the scholars may speak above the heads of the people, but to speak to their hearts — and that is the job of the guru — one should possess the spirit. Only such a guru will be in a position to present the scriptural message in a way intelligible to people of all description — young and old, learned and ignorant, saint and sinner — without compromising its original content.

The guru must also be a man who has overcome sin and evil and, selfish desires and cravings. He must be free from pride and vanity, hypocrisy and jealousy, falsehood and worldly passions and, egoism in all its overt and covert manifestations. As a blind man cannot be a reliable guide to another blind man, so too an imperfect and evil person cannot be an efficient guide to seekers after spiritual

¹⁵ Cfr. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1, 2, 12; *SANKARACARYA, Upadeśasāhasri* (Eng. tr.) Swami Jagadananda, Mylapore 1943, pp. 4-5; *In., Vivekacudamani* (Eng. tr.) M.M. Chatterji, Adyar 1947, pp. 18-19; *SADANANDA, Vedantasara* (Eng. tr.) Swami Nikhilananda, Mayavati 1949, pp. 18-19.

enlightenment. Only a perfect man can lead others to perfection. A perfect man is a master of himself, is dispassionate and tranquil in all circumstances of life. The Hindu authorities strongly underline equanimity as one of the most important marks of a perfect man. In daily life the equanimity is to be manifested by one's remaining unaffected by the pairs of opposites, such as joy and sorrow, friend and foe, heat and cold, success and failure, and so on. As Lord Krishna expresses it in the *Gītā*: « I love the man who hates not nor exults, who mourns not nor desires, who puts away both pleasant and unpleasant things, and who is devoted. I love the man who is the same to friend and foe, (the same) whether he be respected or despised, the same in heat and cold, in pleasure as in pain, who has put away attachment and remains unmoved by praise or blame, who is restrained in speech, contented with whatever comes his way, having no fixed abode, of steady mind and devoted »¹⁶. A legendary story illustrates vividly the real spirit of equanimity and detachment that should characterise an ideal guru. Once the pious monk Sukadeva paid a visit to the holy sage, king Janaka. The monk was deeply scandalized at seeing the grandeur and richness of the royal palace. The king, knowing the thoughts of his guest, decided to teach him a lesson. In an instant Janaka, through his yogic powers, raised a big conflagration in his palace. There was a great confusion there as everybody was trying to save whatever was close to his heart. The monk too hastened in all anxiety to save his sack containing the begging bowl and other trifles. Only the king remained calm and smiling. The fire was as soon extinguished as it was raised. Then the king said: « Sukadeva, you lost your peace and serenity of mind when your belongings were threatened by the fire; I, on the contrary, was remaining calm and peaceful when my whole palace was being reduced to ashes. Detachment doesn't mean to renounce many things and be bound to a little, but to maintain one's peace and tranquillity when one loses all that one has, be it little or much ». Thus, equanimity is shown to be the touch-stone of real detachment.

The guru must be detached not only from external objects, but above all from his own petty ego. In ordinary expression « ego » refers to a person's conscious self which provides him with a sense of identity and coherence, coordinating his past experiences with the present ones. From a spiritual point of view, however, the ego is far from the real, essential « self » of man; it is rather a misleading

¹⁶ 12, 17-19.

shadow of the real self, a veil that covers and distorts it. Because of the dominance of ego man acts as if he were an exclusive individual being, and tends to view everything else in relation to himself alone and his interests. Thus, the ego confines man to the narrow cell of a separate existence, alienating him from the total Reality, whereas the recovery of the real self makes him discover his unity and harmony with the universe at large and with the Divine Reality. So long as one does not overcome the ego, one cannot enjoy real freedom, spiritual expansion and internal illumination. And to liberate oneself from the ego there is no other way than to discourage at all cost its stifling influence and replace it with the all-embracing consciousness of the real self. When the true self emerges, then the limited and the limiting ego fades into unreality; the self-seeking desires are replaced by an expanded consciousness; man experiences unity with the Infinite and with all beings. As a consequence he is drawn to dedicate himself completely, and without any self-interest for the welfare of others, to help them shatter their small egos and realize their real freedom and joy in the spiritual enlightenment. He does nothing and says nothing which is not designed to help others reach the goal of divine illumination more safely and more quickly than they ever could on their own. Egolessness is therefore an important qualification of a genuine guru.

The guru must, above all, be *Brahmanīṣṭa*, established in Brahman, ever living in the Divine. While the Non-dualistic schools would interpret it as signifying the realization by the guru of his identity with the Divine, the theistic schools would rather underline their union. If we overlook the different shades of emphasis in the interpretation, it only means that the guru must enjoy an immediate experience of the Divine; he must be a spiritually enlightened person. This indeed is the crown and consummation of all the other qualifications of a true guru. If he is not enlightened, he cannot enlighten others; he cannot lead others where he has not been himself; he cannot shed even a glimmer of light beyond his own level of attainment. He illuminates others by making available to them the divine light and power, and he will be in a position to do that if only he is one with the Divine; then he draws upon the divine energy. The guru has to deal not only with people who are just beginning their spiritual journey, but also with highly advanced seekers. Only an ideal, illumined guru will be able to adapt himself to the needs of the seekers of any and every level.

The true guru does not depend on mere reading and reasoning for his spiritual wisdom. The wisdom drawn from such sources cannot of itself be an effective guide to spiritual illumination, rather

it is bound to develop into an idle speculation and a dead tradition. The wisdom that should characterise the guru is the one born from personal experience, from actually attaining to the heights of spiritual enlightenment; then the divine wisdom will filter through him. God lives and speaks through such gurus. His words are authoritative and spontaneous, not cleverly concocted by imagination, not carefully prepared in advance. When, on the other hand, an ordinary man or an unenlightened guru speaks, his words, however sublime they may be, come from his own elaboration because he is still under the grip of his ego. His teachings and instructions, therefore, will necessarily leave something to be desired. Only a fully illumined guru will be transparent enough to transmit the uncontaminated wisdom of God and illumine the minds and hearts of others.

The ideal guru is always altruistic. Even though he experiences the profound mysteries of God, he is not blissfully absorbed in them to the extent of making him oblivious of his fellow beings. The fact that he has attained to heights unknown to ordinary humans does not alienate him from them. On the contrary, the more divine the guru is, the more human he becomes. In his union with the Divine, he is in union with every creature, and that, without being contaminated by any selfish interest. This urges him on to spare no effort to help others reach the goal of enlightenment as safely and quickly as possible.

An enlightened guru is also humble. He may not go about trumpeting his humility by repeating, « I am nothing ». He may declare his spiritual identity, point to his inner attainments, with a view to benefitting his followers. He reveals his humility by being completely honest, and without pretense.

A true guru needs no propaganda. He makes no show of superhuman powers and miracles. Even when miracles are wrought by him, he would rather attribute them to the faith of the people who were being benefitted by the extraordinary forces that always surround a God-realized person. It is the insecure, imperfect and unenlightened guru who promotes himself by exhibiting ultrahuman powers and by gloating over his own spiritual attainments. An instinctive preference for being hidden is the hallmark of a true guru. People hear about him when they are ready to hear, and he draws those seekers to himself when they are prepared to benefit from his personal help. As Sri Ramakrishna, the great Vedantic guru, puts it: « Bees come of themselves to the full-blown flower when the breeze wafts its fragrance all around. Ants come of themselves to the spot where sweets are placed. No one need invite the bee or the ant. So when a man becomes pure and perfect, the sweet influen-

ce of his character spreads everywhere, and all who seek the Truth are naturally drawn towards him »¹⁷.

We have an accurate description of a true guru belonging to the Saiva sect in the *Vedānta Sāra*: « A true guru is a man who is in the habit of practising all the virtues; who with the sword of wisdom has lopped off all the branches and torn out all the roots of sin, and who has dispersed, with the light of reason, the thick shadows in which sin is shrouded; who, though seated on a mountain of sins, yet confronts their attacks with a heart as hard as diamond; who behaves with dignity and independence; who has the feeling of a father for all his disciples; who makes no difference in his conduct between his friends and his enemies, but shows equal kindness to both; who looks on gold and precious stones with the same indifference as on pieces of iron or potsherd, and values the one as highly as the other; whose chief care is to enlighten the ignorance in which the rest of mankind is plunged. He is a man who performs all the acts of worship of which Śiva is the object, omitting none; who knows no other God than Śiva, and reads no other history than his; who shines like the sun in the midst of the dark clouds of ignorance which surround him; who meditates unceasingly on the merits of the *lingam*, and proclaims everywhere the praises of Śiva; who rejects even in thought every sinful action, and puts in practice all the virtues that he preaches; who, knowing all the paths which lead to sin, knows also the means of avoiding them; who observes with scrupulous exactitude all the rules of propriety which do honour to Śiva. He should be deeply learned, and know the *Vedānta* perfectly. He is a man who has made pilgrimages to all the sacred places (...). He must have performed his ablutions in all the sacred rivers (...). He must be acquainted with all the observances for penance or *āśramas*, such as are enjoined by the most famous devotees (...). He must be one who has practised these religious exercises, and who has derived benefit from them. He must be perfectly acquainted with the four Vedas (...). This is the character of a true guru; these are the qualities which he ought to possess, that he may be in a position to show others the path of virtue, and help them out of the slough of vice »¹⁸.

The Tantric tradition describes an ideal guru: « A guru, according to the Tantra śāstra, is one who is possessed of the following qualities: a body which is pure both on the mother's and father's

¹⁷ *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, Mylapore 1960, p. 74.

¹⁸ Cfr. J.A. DUBOIS, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Oxford 1906, pp. 123-125.

side; purity of thought; mastery over the senses; knowledge of the substance of all Tantras; knowledge of the purpose of all śāstras; a doer of good to others; devoted to *japa*, *pūja*, and so forth; truthfulness of speech acquired by austerity; calmness; proficiency in the Vedas and the Vedāngas; eagerness to know the truths of the yoga path, and who feels the presence of Divinity in the heart, and so forth »¹⁹. « He is called a good guru who has the reputation of being *siddha* (enlightened), maintains his disciples in any way which their necessities require, and works wonders by means of Divine Sakti. A good guru is he who speaks of things previously unheard of and suited to the mind of the hearer truly and in a charming way, and who can equally explain both Tantra and Mantra. A good guru is he who is always anxious to benefit the disciple by giving him knowledge, and who is capable of punishing as well as rewarding. A good guru is he whose aim is always the highest good, who ever converses upon spiritual truths, and who has a single-minded devotion to the lotus-feet of his own guru »²⁰.

The above analysis and descriptions bring to clear focus the high perfection required from a true guru. Though in some details they smack of sectarian expressions, they offer us very useful material that will enable us to identify genuine gurus and fakes, irrespective of their sect or school.

The Disciple (śisya)

The simple fact that a person attains to spiritual perfection and illumination does not make him a guru automatically. Just as one becomes a teacher by teaching some students, so one becomes a guru by giving initiation (*dikṣa*) to some followers. Having some disciples²¹ duly initiated by him is what entitles him to be called a guru. The Hindu scriptures and tradition very severely warn him against giving initiation to unworthy aspirants. He should first of all

¹⁹ Cfr. A. AVALON (Ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, op. cit., pp. 539-540.

²⁰ Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 550.

²¹ Prof. Jain, a disciple of Swami Muktananda, says: « The definition of shishya is very wide. A person who comes here once every two years may claim to be a shishya of Baba's (the Guru), and the same term may be applied to someone who stays with him twenty-four hours a day and is going to be with him for the rest of his life. So it's really wide; but a true shishya is one who has become one with his Guru or who is trying to become one with him. That is, who doesn't think what he doesn't want him to think, who doesn't even feel what he doesn't want him to feel. He doesn't will anything that he doesn't want him to will » (P. BRENT, *Godmen of India*, Penguin Books 1973, p. 271).

ascertain their quality and preparation, because only the duly qualified aspirants will be in a position to grasp the true meaning and spirit of his instruction and follow it up perseveringly. The Chāndogya Upanishad says: « Verily a father may teach this (doctrine of) Brahman to his eldest son or to a worthy disciple, but to no one else at all. Even if one should offer him this (earth) that is encompassed by water and filled with treasure, (he should say): 'This, truly, is more than that! This, truly, is more than that!' »²². And Kularṇava Tantra declares: « If a guru initiates one who is unworthy through desire for wealth or through fear, greed or the like, then the curse of the Divinity will fall on that guru and the initiation given by him will be fruitless »²³.

But, who is a worthy disciple? According to the Vedantic tradition²⁴, he must be endowed with the following qualifications: a) a general comprehension of the sacred scriptures acquired in the proper manner under the guidance of a competent master; b) discrimination between the Real and the unreal, Brahman being the only thing that is permanently Real, compared to which everything else is unreal, transitory, illusory; c) renunciation of the desire to enjoy the transitory pleasures; d) the virtues like control of the mind (śama), control of the senses (dama), renunciation of the world (uparati), forebearance (titikṣā), concentration of the mind on the Divine Reality (samādhāna), and faith in the scriptural teachings and in the guru who transmits them (śraddhā); and e) an ardent desire for the spiritual liberation (mumukṣutva).

The Kularṇava Tantra gives a detailed description of the defects that disqualify a person from being a disciple. The text says: « A guru should not take as his śiṣya (disciple) one who is possessed of any of the following or similar faults: He should not accept one who is born in a family cursed by a Brāhmaṇa or almost extinct; without any good quality on the maternal side; one who has been already initiated by a good guru; an unbeliever; imbecile; with an overweening idea of his own learning; having less or more than the usual number of or deformed limbs; paralyzed, blind, deaf, dirty, diseased, excommunicated, foul-mouthed; careless about the rules of dress; full of faults; with imperfect limbs, gait and speech; ever inactive, under the influence of sleep or drowsiness; lazy and addicted to gambling and similar vices; whose appearance does not be token devotion; mean-minded, wanting in loyalty, and given to exaggerated, improper and obscene talks; wanting in feeling for

²² 3, 11, 5-6.

²³ Cfr. A. AVALON (Ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, op. cit., p. 580.

others; with no will of his own; ready to receive initiation and do other acts, not out of any particular desire of his own, but at the instigation of others; the mere instigator of others; impure as regards wealth and wife; given to the performance of acts prohibited by the scriptures, and omitting to do those which they enjoin; whose habit it is to divulge secrets and to do mischief; (...) of ill-repute; who bears false witness; a deceiver of people; braggart or liar; cruel; indecent in speech; talkative; of wrong judgement as regards men or things; quarrelsome; given to rebuking people without reason; ignorant; unbeliever; a bore; one who slanders people behind their back and speaks well of them before their face; or one pretending to a knowledge of Brahman which he does not possess; plagiarist; or self-praiser, envious, given to evil-doing, or peevish »²⁵.

According to Gandharva Tantra, a worthy disciple should be possessed of the following good qualities: « Very sweet of tongue; stainless in body and speech; wearing white cloth; pure in habits; incapable of speaking ill of others, or of showing disrespect to gods; never covetous of others' food, wives, and land; unwilling to give pain to others; kind to all creatures; sharp-witted; a master of his senses; a believer devoted to guru; pure; calm-minded; without avarice; constant in his friendships; assiduous to obey the guru's words; ever firm in devotion to guru, mantra and Devata »²⁶.

From these descriptions it becomes evident that, if it is difficult to get a competent guru, it is still more difficult to find qualified disciples. As a Hindu Pandit would put it: « Even today it is not impossible to find ten good gurus out of every hundred. But does one find even a single *śisya* out of a thousand who is competent to be a disciple according to the *śāstra*? »²⁷. It is believed that if a person is a sincere seeker of spiritual enlightenment, God himself will send a proper guru to him²⁸. Just as competent gurus will never be wanting in worthy disciples, so also worthy disciples

²⁴ Cfr. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3, 2, 10; *Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, 4, 4, 23; 6, 3, 12; *Svetāśvatara Upanishad*, 6, 22; *Maitri Upanishad*, 6, 29; SANKARACARYA, *Vivekacūḍāmani*, op. cit., pp. 18-33; SADANANDA, *Vedānta Sāra*, op. cit., pp. 6-26.

²⁵ Cfr. A. AVALON (Ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, op. cit., pp. 584-585.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 585.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 563-564.

²⁸ Ramana Maharshi teaches: « The Guru is the Self. At some time a man grows dissatisfied with his life and, not content with what he has, seeks the satisfaction of his desires through prayer to God. His mind is gradually purified until he longs to know God, more to obtain his Grace than to satisfy wordly desires. Then God's grace begins to manifest itself. God takes the form of a Guru and appears to the devotee, teaches him the Truth, and, moreover, purifies his mind by associating with him. The devotee's mind thus gains strength

will never be wanting in competent gurus. In other words, a disciple gets a guru he deserves. In any case, the guru has the grave responsibility of duly preparing the aspirant by trials and training before giving him initiation²⁹. And it is only with the initiation that the guru-śiṣya relationship is formally established.

The Initiation (dikṣā)

Here we are not speaking of the sacrament (samskāra) of initiation (upanayana), but of the intervention of a guru for introducing formally a worthy aspirant into a spiritual discipline. This is generally specified by the term *dikṣā*. From time immemorial Hindu tradition attaches immense importance to this mediation of a guru. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* declares that the Supreme Reality cannot be attained by thought and reasoning, but only when revealed by another person of higher attainment, that is by a competent guru³⁰. According to *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, it was already an accepted teaching that the supreme knowledge of Brahman could be best attained only through the help of a qualified guru³¹. The *Kuṭārṇava Tantra*, therefore, states: « It is laid down by the Lord that there can be no mokṣa (liberation) without *dikṣā* (initiation) »³². Again: « All *japa*, *pūja* and like actions by those who are not initiated are fruitless like the seed sown on rock. For one without *dikṣā* there is neither fulfilment nor happy destination »³³.

Prof. Gonda, writing on Viṣṇuism and Śivaism, the two most

and is then able to turn inward. By meditation it is further purified until it remains calm without the least ripple. That calm Expanse is the self.

« The Guru is both outer and inner. From outside he gives a push to the mind to turn inward while from inside he pulls the mind towards the Self and helps in quieting it. That is the Grace of the Guru. There is no difference between God, Guru and the Self » (Cfr. T.M.P. MAHADEVAN, *Ramana Maharshi*, London 1977, pp. 179-180).

²⁹ Swami Muktananda says: « The guru must find out whether a person who has come to him is fit for self-realization. (...) He tests them in different ways. There is no course of examinations or anything like that. It would depend on the inner state of the disciple. What is really to be looked for is how far the particular disciple will be able to go on the path and how much natural stability he has. And then how much love he has for the Master. At times the guru may even behave in a manner which is shocking. He may get angry with you but you may not be at fault — he has to test you. He will keep on testing you until he breaks the back of your pride » (P. BRENT, *Godmen of India*, op. cit., p. 275).

³⁰ 2, 8-9.

³¹ 4, 9, 2-3.

³² M.P. PANDIT, *Kuṭārṇava Tantra*, op. cit., p. 101.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

important Hindu sects, observes: « Both religions feeling the need of this institution [dikṣā] very strongly, Viṣṇuism emphasized its character as an initiation to a life of devotion, as an entrance into closer contact with God, although freedom from *karma* and *samsāra* are, besides happiness, prosperity, knowledge, a long life and other ambitions, among the ideals to be realized through this rite. Śaivism, on the other hand, urges the absolute necessity of ūaivi *dikṣā*, initiation into a ūaiva 'order', performed in accordance with the ūaiva ritual, for anyone who wishes to attain to final liberation »³⁴. As regards the finality of *dikṣā*, the author points out: « It is the opinion of both religions that the main object of *dikṣā* is purification. Whereas the Viṣṇuites assert that this is a prerequisite to admission to a religious order or community because the soul needs purification before it can become God-conscious, the ūaivas hold that the *dikṣā* imparted by a guru, who represents God himself and who after initiation continues to assist the initiate, destroys the original impurity (*anava mala*) and paves the way for removing 'animality' (*paśutva*) and for attaining the state of being ūiva (*śivatva*) »³⁵. In short, *dikṣā* marks the beginning of a new vital contact between the devotee and the Divinity established through the mediation of a guru.

Generally speaking, the rite consists in the guru's communicating to the disciple a *mantra*, that is, a sacred formula taken from the scriptures, or a holy Name, or a symbolic expression. This may be accompanied by other ceremonies of purification, sprinkling of holy water, invocation of the divinities, meditation and other acts of worship. But the important part is the imparting of the mantra³⁶.

³⁴ *Viṣṇuism and Śaivism*, New Delhi 1976, p. 64.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁶ The *Śivapurāṇa* explains, in the words of the Lord ūiva, how the mantra-dikṣā is to be given: « If a mantra is well practised with the acquisition of the behest (of the guru), attended with holy rites, equipped with faith in me, and accompanied by fee, it is greatly efficacious. The devotee shall approach the brahmin guru who knows the principles, performs *japa*, is devoted to meditation and endowed with virtues. He shall strenuously propitiate him mentally, verbally, physically and monetarily. He shall possess the purity of piety. (...) When the guru is satisfied he shall let him stay for a year serving him without arrogance. On an auspicious day thereafter he shall make him take his bath after observing fast. For the sake of purity he shall again be subjected to ablution with vessels full of ghee and sacred water wherein holy materials shall be put. He shall dress him well and bedeck him with fragrant garlands, ornaments and garments. The *Punyāha* mantras shall be recited and barhmīs worshipped. Then in a holy spot, near the seashore, river bank, cowpen temple or in the house itself, at an auspicious hour when the day is conducive to achievement, when the conjunctions of stars are devoid of defects, he shall bless him and impart to him my knowledge duly. In a secluded spot the guru, delighted in mind, shall repeat the mantra with due accents. He

It is insisted that one should keep one's mantra secret, not because of any magic motive, but because of the belief that it is something intimately and exclusively personal. The mantra becomes the centre of gravitation of the spiritual quest of the initiate. Everyday he practises the *mantra japa*, that is, repeats the mantra vocally or mentally several times, and concentrates his mind and heart on it during meditation with a view to realizing internally what is symbolized by it. To quote Prof. Gonda: « A *mantra* containing the name of God — for instance *namah Śivāya* — is indeed regarded as embodying the energy of the god which is activated by pronouncing the formula. The knowledge of, and meditation on, a mantra enables the adept to exert influence upon the god, to exercise power over the potencies manifesting in it, to establish connections between the divinity and himself, or to realize his identity with that divinity. The idea expressed by means of a *mantra* which is characteristic of, and handed down in, a definite religious community, and by being informed of which one is received into membership, is described as 'the sum of all spiritual truth', as the concentrated essence of divine reality, etc. Such a formula becomes so to say the 'watch-word' of a community or the 'hallmark' of the correct ritual behaviour of the one who pronounces it »³⁷. During the initiation rite the mantra is pronounced orally into the ear of the disciple, it is not given in writing.

One may get to know from books and other sources the mantras that are in use among different sects and schools³⁸. But for spi-

shall then make the disciple repeat it. Then the guru shall say, 'Let there be welfare. Let there be auspiciousness around. Let everything be pleasing and auspicious'. Thus the guru shall impart the mantra and allow him to practise it » (*Śivapurāṇa*, *Vāyavīya-samhitā*, 2, 14, 2-15, see J.L. SHASTRI (Ed.), *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, vol. IV, Delhi 1974, pp. 1959-1960).

³⁷ *Visnuism and Śivaism*, op. cit., p. 67; The mantra which is chosen for Japa has the necessary power within it and by constant repetition under proper conditions the power can be evoked into operation to effectuate the purpose. The vibrations set up each time the mantra is repeated go to create, in the subtler atmosphere, the conditions that induce the fulfilment of the object in view. The Divine Name, for instance, has the potency to stamp and mould the consciousness which repeats it into the nature of the Divinity for which the Name stands and prepare it for the reception of the gathering revelation of Godhead » (M.P. PANDIT, *Japa*, Pondicherry 1977, pp. 2-3).

³⁸ Here are a few well-known Mantras. Normally they are used in the original language, not in translations.

OM. (This is the sacred monosyllable which symbolizes Brahman, the Supreme Reality).

Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman).

Soham (He I am).

Tat tvam asi (That thou art).

OM namah Śivāya (OM salutation to Śiva).

Namaste Śankarāya (Salutation to Śankara).

ritual realization it is not enough that one picks and chooses a mantra of one's liking from such sources; it must be duly communicated by a competent guru. All agree that mantras are charged with an inherent spiritual power, but normally it is dormant. It is to be awakened in order that it may produce the desired result, and the awakening is effected by the guru. While imparting the mantra to the disciple, the guru intentionally instills into it his own spiritual energy which dynamises the divine force embedded in it. The disciple, then, by his *japa* or the constant repetition of it and concentration and meditation on it, realizes its salutary fruits. That is why the *Kularṇava Tantra* declares: « Only that mantra which is received through the grace of the guru (guru kṛpā) can give all fulfilment »³⁹. Just as a wick can, when lighted, burn and illuminate according to the quantity of its combustible substance, but in order to light it another flame is required, in like manner, for the uninitiated the intervention of a qualified guru is necessary so that he may attain to spiritual enlightenment through the practice of mantra. It is said that various mantras have got various potencies and that the guru selects the one that is most appropriate to the nature and the needs of the disciple. In the spiritual enlightenment of the disciple, therefore, the inherent energy of the mantra (mantra sakti) and the grace of the guru (guru kṛpā) work together with his personal efforts.

It is to be borne in mind, however, that the communication by the guru of a mantra, called *mantra dīkṣā*, though the most common form of initiation, is not the only one. Other types also are recognised, such as initiation by touch (*sparśa dīkṣā*), initiation by

OM namo Nārāyaṇāya (OM salutation to Nārāyana!).

OM namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya (OM salutation to Lord Vasudeva).

Sri Rāmāya namah (Salutation to Sri Rāma!).

Sri Krishna ṣaraṇam mama (Sri Krishna is my refuge).

OM Sri Durgāyai namah (OM salutation to Sri Durga!).

Om Sri Ram jaya, Ram jaya jaya Ram.

Hare Krishna, hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna hare hare,

Hare Rama, hare Rama, Rama Rama hare hare.

³⁹ M.P. PANDIT, *Gems from Tantras*, Madras 1969, p. 61; Mantra, however, even when communicated by the guru, does not work automatically, as some people seem to believe. In order that it may produce the intended results, « there must be at least a strong Faith in the Mantra. When repeated with such a faith for long, the Mantra goes on creating vibrations which press upon the layers of the inner consciousness till one day there comes a sudden opening and the Truth ensouled in the Mantra reveal itself to the being » (M.P. PANDIT, *Japa*, op. cit., pp. 9-10); « Stories in the Puranas and allied literature celebrating the fruit of *japa* done unconsciously or without knowing a bit of its meaning, are mostly well-meaning panegyrics seeking only to emphasise the glory of *japa* and should not be taken literally » (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

sight (*drg-dikṣā*), and initiation by thought (*manodikṣā*)⁴⁰.

Initiation by touch: The guru, after concentrating the mind and heart on God and invoking the divine power, imposes the hands on the disciple. Sri Ramakrishna is said to have imparted spiritual illumination to his renowned disciple Swami Vivekananda by a mere touch.

Initiation by sight: After deep concentration and meditation on the Divinity, with a happy mind the guru gazes into the disciple's eyes. Sri Aurobindo is said to have given spiritual insight to many by his penetrating look⁴¹.

Initiation by thought: The guru by a simple act of the mind and will transmits his spiritual power to the disciple. This presupposes very high inner attainments in both the guru and the disciple. In fact the authorities acknowledge that only by a happy coincidence of the extraordinary merits of the guru and the disciple an initiation of this sort could take place⁴².

From the above distinction of the various types of initiation it becomes evident that the imparting of a mantra is not the common element, and hence not the indispensable part of *dikṣā*. Its most important constituent is the transmission from the part of the guru, into the disciple, of a spiritual energy, a mysterious power which transforms the disciple's inner life, and sets in motion a new dynamism in his spiritual evolution. This is technically called *śaktipāta*, that is, the descent of energy, or the infusion of power. The communication of mantra is the normal vehicle of this infusion. It is believed that the guru radiates a divine energy which only a responsive disciple will be able to receive with benefit. The disciple renders himself responsive to the impact of that radiation by his faithful devotion and humble surrender to the guru. The disciple must empty himself of egoism before the infusion of the guru-śakti

⁴⁰ Cfr. M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārnava Tantra*, op. cit., pp. 104-107; V.H. DATE, *The Yoga of the Saints*, New Delhi 1974, pp. 17-22.

⁴¹ Swami Ananda relates: « My guru used to ask me to sit before him from time to time and in silence. No talk. No speech. I would sit, simply, closing my eyes; and sometimes he would touch my forehead also. Then he would ask me to look at his eyes. This happened many times. Things like that act invisibly » (P. BRENT, *Godmen of India*, op. cit., p. 164).

⁴² Swami Ananda observes: « Just as sitting here we can hear messages over the radio from Moscow or New York, so a guru who has got a relationship towards the whole mundane earth, towards nature also, feels he can radiate. (...) And he reaches the people through sleep, through dreams, through silence; but not until and unless you allow yourself to receive. How? By making the mind vacant, by sitting quiet, by doing meditation; just as with a transistor or a radio you have to find the particular station, so in order to receive the guru's message you have to fix yourself in certain postures of mind and body » (*Ibid.*, pp. 165-166).

can fructify in him. In order that the *śaktipāta* may bear the maximum fruit, the competence of the guru must be synchronized with the devotion of the disciple.

Let us see what the gurus themselves have to say about the phenomenon of *śaktipāta*. Swami Muktananda writes: « Concisely, to transmit one's own glory and lustre of divine Enlightenment into the disciple, and give him an instantaneous direct experience of Brahman, the eternal Spirit, is the secret meaning of *śaktipāta* »⁴³. Swami Akhananda of Vrindaban says: « As for *śaktipāta*, this transmission of energy happens when the grace of the guru and the devotion of the *śishya* meet at the same point. Short of that there will be no such transmission (...). Sometimes such a transmission will be at the conscious behest of the guru, at other times it may happen involuntarily. But the grace of the one and the devotion of the other must converge until they are at the same point and at the same level »⁴⁴. Swami Indresh Charandasji states: « The transfer of power from guru to disciple does exist, no doubt about it. (...) The point is, you prepare the mind of the disciple and when you know the actual point has come you put the good thing into it! »⁴⁵.

As regards the nature and the salutary effects of *śaktipāta*, Swami Muktananda explains: « *Śaktipāta* is a subtle spiritual process by which the guru transmits his divine power into the aspirant either by touch, word, look or thought. This is *dikṣā* or initiation. It marks the beginning of spiritual awareness in the disciple. (...) This awakening of *śakti* also affords the aspirant wonderful spiritual experiences. Being blessed by the grace of the guru, he also develops

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-279; The Swami explains: « As for shaktipata, sometimes the Divine power is directed by the guru, sometimes it works through him so that he becomes a channel for it. Shakti does sometimes work independently of any personal powers of the guru, and any conscious thought of passing that Shakti on to the disciple is a secondary factor. There are certain gurus who instruct their disciples to sit on a particular day at a particular time and that at that time the shaktipata will take place. I don't work in such a conscious manner nor do I think about a particular devotee either. I don't even care when they are going to receive it. A certain professor came here from South Africa and he was a great scholar; he held high degrees and he had studied Vedanta and philosophy and he was a very good student of both. He was here for three months. I never talked to him. Then during the last week before he left he received so much shakti from me that he started weeping and laughing, and other signs also appeared. I don't think about it and for this reason: I know the whim of the Shakti very well; Shakti herself is omniscient and she has knowledge, and so it is Shakti which looks after the disciples. I don't exercise the Shakti power by any conscious wish. It is only that teacher whose shakti is not omniscient who will consciously think of helping the disciple. I don't have to think about it » (*Ibid.*, p. 278).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

a sense of well-being. His attitude towards life undergoes a change. There is a spontaneous feeling of being at peace with himself and the world. All doubts resolve and he begins to grasp the significance of spiritual truths more clearly than ever. He feels the presence of divine grace around him, protecting and guiding him. Eventually he experiences divine existence as a positive reality, not a figment of abstract imagination »⁴⁶.

Some gurus believe that if śaktipāta takes place prematurely, that is, when the disciple is not responsive enough to the impact of the guruśakti, it will be harmful to the disciple. Others disagree. For instance, Swami Padmanabhanand Sarasvati of Benares remarks: « As to śaktipāta, it will never harm the śisya, not in the least. Because the power is given in such a way that it won't harm you. The guru knows where it is to strike. No question of harm. The carpenter knows where the wood is to be touched, the smith knows where the iron is to be struck; so the guru knows where the śisya

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 232; Dr. PAUL BRUNTON, in his book, *A Search in Secret India* (London, Rider & Co., 1960), gives an account of his own personal experience at the hermitage of the famous guru Ramana Maharishi: « I enter the hall, bow before the Maharishi, and quietly sit down on folded legs. I may read or write for a while, or engage in conversation with one or two of the other men, or tackle the Maharishi on some point (...) But whatever I am doing I never fail to become gradually aware of the mysterious atmosphere of the place, of the benign radiations which steadily percolate into my brain. I enjoy an ineffable tranquillity merely by sitting for a while in the neighbourhood of the Maharishi. By careful observation and frequent analysis I arrive in time at the complete certitude that a reciprocal interinfluence arises whenever our presences neighbour each other. The thing is most subtle. But it is quite unmistakable » (p. 201). The Author relates further: « From time to time the Maharishi unexpectedly visits me at the hut after finishing his own lunch. I seize the opportunity to plague him with further questions, which he patiently answers (...) But once, when I propound some fresh problem, he makes no answer. Instead, he gazes out towards the jungle-covered hills which stretch to the horizon and remains motionless. Many minutes pass, but still his eyes are fixed, his presence remote. I am quite unable to discern whether his attention is being given to some invisible psychic being in the distance or whether it is being turned on some inward preoccupation. At first I wonder whether he has heard me, but in the tense silence which ensues, and which I feel unable or unwilling to break, a force greater than my rationalistic mind commences to awe me until it ends by overwhelming me.

« The realization forces itself through my wonderment that all my questions are moves in an endless game, the play of thoughts which possess no limit to their extent; that somewhere within me there is a well of certitude which can provide me with all the waters of truth I require; and that it will be better to cease my questioning and attempt to realize the tremendous potencies of my own spiritual nature. So I remain silent and wait.

« For almost half an hour the Maharishi's eyes continue to stare straight in front of him in a fixed, unmoving gaze. He appears to have forgotten me, but I am perfectly aware that the sublime realization which has suddenly fallen upon me is nothing else than a spreading ripple of the telepathic radiation from this mysterious and imperturbable man » (pp. 201-202).

is to be touched and at what point he is to be touched. And such a form of enlightenment will last because it is not the outward power — that can be lost — but it is spiritual power. Once you have got it, you have got it permanently »⁴⁷.

The Cult of the Guru

Ascribing to the guru an all-important role in the spiritual life of the disciple, the Hindu tradition demands from the disciple a humble submission, a blind obedience and a sincere devotion to him. A merely natural and intellectual approach to the guru is not the right one. One should approach him with faith and love, otherwise the guru cannot be of any help to the aspirant. The scriptures teach that the guru deserves much more respect than one's own parents because, whereas the parents are the cause of one's natural birth, the guru is the cause of one's spiritual rebirth, without which the natural birth would mean only an interminable chain of trials and sufferings⁴⁸.

It is not enough that the guru be treated with greater respect than the parents, but he should be venerated as equal to God. As far as the disciple is concerned, his guru is the very Divinity in human form⁴⁹. The Hindu tradition is never tired of insisting that the true Guru, the Guru par excellence, is God and God alone. He is the inner guru of every human being. By the inpouring of His presence and grace He is guiding progressively, but invisibly, each individual man to his glorious destiny. But unfortunately not all are capable of following the unseen Guru within; most men need an external support, a living influence, a tangible example, a present instruction. This is provided by the human guru in whose person God mercifully conceals his Godhead in order to help the weakness of the spiritual seeker.

The Tantric texts are apparently extravagant in extolling the divinity of the guru. In the *Kulārnava Tantra*, in a conversation with

⁴⁷ P. BRENT, *Godmen of India*, p. 234.

⁴⁸ *Manu*, 2, 146.

⁴⁹ Swami Muktananda remarks: « The West has difficulties with the idea of the guru as divine because of a certain stupidity on the part of a few people, because the Western people have been taught to look upon themselves as sinners. If they could look upon themselves as divine, it wouldn't be difficult to consider the guru divine — once they consider themselves divine. Even the Bible teach you that you are a sinner, and in prayer after prayer you keep on repeating that. And once you are convinced inside that you are a sinner, it becomes very difficult for you to look on the other person as God » (P. BRENT, *Godmen of India*, p. 275).

his spouse, Lord Siva explains: « O Devī, although this my form as Siva is my gross aspect, it is yet being full of light and energy imperceptible to human eyes. For this reason I have assumed the form of guru in the world of man, and thus protect the race of disciples. Paramaśiva himself in human body secretly wanders on the earth in order to favour disciples. For the protection of the pious, Sadāśiva assumes a modest form, and though being himself above the samsāra, yet appears and acts in this world as though he were a man of the samsāra. O beloved, the revered guru is Śiva though he has not three eyes; Viṣṇu too, though he has not four arms; and Brahmā also, though he has not four heads. O Bhavāni, when the fruits of sin predominate, guru appears as man, and when the fruits of virtuous acts prevail, guru appears as Śiva. Like blind men deprived for ever of sight of the sun, unfortunate men (jīva) are unable to see the real aspect of guru, the embodiment of the Brahman, though he is present before their eyes. It is undoubtedly true that guru is Deva Sadāśiva himself, for who is it who grants liberation to disciples if guru be not Śiva himself? (...) Assuming the form of a guru all-merciful Lord (Iśvara) liberates by means of initiation (dīkṣā) the unenlightened men (paśu) bound by the bonds of māyā »⁵⁰.

The text therefore admonishes the aspirants: « To perdition he goes who regards the guru as human, the mantra as mere letters, and the images as stone. Never look upon the guru as a mortal. Should you do so, then neither mantra nor worship can give you success. Do not associate the holy guru with the ordinary folk either in your remembrance or in talk. Otherwise all the good that is done turns into evil »⁵¹.

Accepting whole-heartedly the divinity of the guru, the disciple should do everything possible to please him. Only if the guru is pleased the religious observances and the spiritual exercises of the disciple can bear fruit. In the Linga Purāṇa we read: « Just as a piece of gold eschews its impurities after coming into contact with fire, so also a man eschews sins due to his contact with the guru. Just as the ghee in a pot placed near fire becomes melted, so also the sin of a person near the guru becomes dissolved. Just as the blazing fire burns ordure and lumber, so also the contented guru burns sins by means of the power of his mantra. Undoubtedly if the guru is satisfied, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Devas and sages are also satisfied and they bless him. One shall never infuriate the guru physically, mentally or verbally. By his wrath are burned the longevity, fortune,

⁵⁰ A. AVALON (Ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, op. cit., pp. 533-534.

⁵¹ M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārṇava Tantra*, op. cit., p. 80.

wisdom and good holy rites. The sacrifices of those who infuriate him are futile. His japas and other observances are also futile. No doubt should be entertained in this respect »⁵². The *Kulārnava Tantra* declares: « At the root of meditation (dhyāna) is the form of the guru; at the root of worship (puja) is the feet of the guru; at the root of mantra is the word of the guru; and at the root of liberation (mokṣa) is the grace of the guru »⁵³. That is, an aspirant who wishes that his spiritual practices be crowned with success and final liberation, should attune himself to the subtle impact of the guru, whose grace is indispensable for spiritual perfection. The Tantras go to the extent of asserting that, whereas the guru can avert from the disciple the evil consequences of the displeasure of God, God himself cannot avert the evil effects of the displeasure of the guru⁵⁵. The disciple, therefore, is advised to spare no effort to ensure for himself the good pleasure of the guru. He should serve the guru in every way possible, such as by rendering physical service to him, offering him material goods according to his capacity, showing him external expressions of honour and respect, and maintaining sentiments of love and joy in his regard. Above all, he should surrender himself completely to the guru⁵⁶. If the guru is pleased with him, he can take it for granted that the gods are pleased with him as well.

Bowing down to the feet of the guru is a traditional way of showing reverence to him. To an external observer this may look odious. As a matter of fact, the whole institution of the guru-siṣya relationship may look odious to one who does not know and accept its spirit and significance. The same may be said of many rites and observances of any religious tradition. In all appearance the cult of the guru is idolatrous. But the point is that the cult of the guru is the cult of what the guru stands for⁵⁷. To the disciple he repre-

⁵² 1, 85, 170 ff, see J.L. SHASTRI (Ed.), *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, op. cit., vol. V, p. 436.

⁵³ M.P. PANDIT, *Gems from the Tantras*, op. cit., p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārnava Tantra*, op. cit., p. 82.

⁵⁶ Prof. Jain, a disciple of Swami Muktananda, affirms: « Giving yourself to him (guru) doesn't mean losing your individuality; on the contrary, your individuality becomes stronger. Just as Vivekananda was very different from Ramakrishna. So it may sound paradoxical, but the fact is that if you make the completest possible surrender or subjection or submission to the guru, then you are as a matter of fact establishing your own true individuality. (...) The more you submit yourself to him the more unique will be the things which he will recommend, that's to say, the more uniquely adjusted to your temperament and needs would be the practices recommended by him » (P. BRENT, *God-men of India*, p. 269).

⁵⁷ Swami Muktananda declares: « I have no need of the devotion of the

sents the Infinite in a finite form. It is this faith and trust that enables the disciple to obtain the full benefit of the guru's *śakti*, which is not confined to the spiritual domain only, but can be extended even to the material sphere; all depends on the faith of the disciple.

There is a popular story that illustrates the extraordinary power of the faith in the guru. Once a guru and his disciple, on their way to a particular place, found themselves at the bank of a river infested by crocodiles, at a time when no means for crossing the river was available. The disciple, then, invoking with deep faith and trust the name of the guru, jumped into the water and crossed the river safe and sound. The guru was pleasantly surprised at seeing the power of his name. Mustering up all his courage and pronouncing his own name, the guru too jumped into the river. But no sooner did he step into the water than he was devoured by the crocodiles. It is faith in the guru, not vanity, that works miracle!

In the light of these ideas and attitudes one can appreciate the following verses attributed to Śankarācārya in praise of devotion to the guru:

« Though your body be comely and ever remain in perfect health,
 Though your name be unsullied, and mountain-high your hoard
 of gold,
 Yet if the mind be not absorbed in the guru's lotus feet,
 What will it all avail you? What indeed will it all avail?

Even if you be honoured at home and famed in foreign lands,
 Given to pious deeds, and ever averse to wickedness,
 Yet if the mind be not absorbed in the guru's lotus feet,
 What will it all avail you? What indeed will it all avail? »⁵⁸

Conclusion

We have tried above to highlight the nature and functions of an ideal guru as envisaged by the Hindu tradition. The true guru is the one who is « capable of destroying the bondage of those who adhere to him. He is an ocean of immutable wisdom. His knowledge

disciples. But then, if it is devotion which is the chief attainment of a particular disciple... Now, whether he gives me devotion or not does not affect me at all; but that inner devotion is the chief gain of the disciple » (*Ibid.*, p. 277).

⁵⁸ SWAMI NIHILANANDA, *Self-knowledge of Sri Śankarācārya*, Mylapore 1967, pp. 231 ff.

is all-comprehensive. He is pure as crystal. He has attained victory over desires. He is supreme among the knowers of Brahman. He rests calmly in Brahman (...) He is an endless reservoir of mercy. There is no explanation why he is merciful; it is his very nature. He befriends all sadhus who adhere to him »⁵⁹. To the disciple the guru shines as the focus of attention throughout his spiritual endeavour; he is the model to emulate and the ideal to realize. To become a spiritually illumined person like the guru is the cherished desire of every true disciple. The guru is the guide who leads him through the right path, the protector who saves him from all dangers. Though it is insisted that the discipline should look upon the guru as Divine, the fact of his humanity allows the disciple to approach him without the crushing sense of awe and fear which the transcendent Divinity would inspire. The impact of the guru's spiritual energy facilitates the enlightenment of the earnest disciple. In moments of difficulty and despondency the guru remains the source of encouragement and the firm guarantee to the hope of realizing one day the sublime end of spiritual realization.

Despite the fact that Hinduism does not have a centralized authority (like the Pope in the Catholic Church), if it has preserved its continuity and stability, it is to a great extent because of the institution of guru with its insistence on absolute surrender of the disciple. This institution is also an index to the vitality of Hinduism. It seems to me that one of the main criteria for gauging the vitality of a religion as religion should be the direct spiritual or mystical experience, generation after generation, in at least a sizable number of its adherents. If so, Hinduism, thanks to the institution of guru which is particularly geared to such experience, does claim many such adherents to its credit⁶⁰.

The complete submission to the guru demanded from the disciple often comes for much criticism from many observers. One should not forget, however, that such a submission is demanded only from

⁵⁹ A. OSBORNE (Ed.), *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, London 1972, p. 131.

⁶⁰ « You often hear religious leaders in the West ask why so many young people feel that they must turn to some foreign or mysterious mystical path to find meaning, when their own religion has all the answers. That's the problem — the administrators of religion are trained to be proficient with a collection of rituals and answers, and they purvey and conduct rather than awaken. The closest that most orthodox religious authorities come to awakening the spirit of their followers is through dramatic rhetoric on the pulpit, not through their own inherent spiritual attainment. And that's about as effective as trying to charge a battery with a match instead of an electric current. (...) Is it any surprise that someone who hungers to find God looks elsewhere for his guide? » (R. CHAPMAN, *How to Choose a Guru*, New York 1973, p. 81).

one who is a disciple. One becomes a disciple by a free choice, and it is a radical choice too. The Hindu tradition insists that not only should the guru test the disciple, but the disciple too should test the competence of the guru before confiding himself to him. The *Kularṇava Tantra*, for instance, declares: « The disciple also shall test the guru in similar signs as joy, etc. in *japa*, *stotra*, *dhyāna*, *homa*, *pūjā*, and so on. After knowing his capacity for transmission of knowledge, perfection in the science of mantra, ability to make subtle impact, one is to become his disciple, not otherwise »⁶¹. Of course, once the guru and the disciple have accepted each other and their relation formally established through initiation, the disciple's commitment to the guru must be total. Then only can the guru act effectively and the infusion of his energy (*śaktipāta*) bring about the desired fruit in time. Any compromise with the surrender to the guru will also be a compromise with one's own spiritual growth. Swami Abhishiktananda, a French Benedictine monk, who had long personal experience of Hindu gurus, writes that he alone can receive spiritual illumination, *Brahmavidyā*, « who is inwardly attuned to his guru and whose spirit is so free that truth can possess him without meeting any obstacle. 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 possible means of communicating spiritual truth »⁶².

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⁶¹ M.P. PANDIT, *Kulārnava Tantra*, op. cit., p. 103.

⁶² *Saccidananda*, Delhi 1974, quoted by SR. VANDANA, *The Guru as Present Reality*, in « *Vidyajyoti* » 39 (1975) 8, p. 356.