

Acharya-abhimanam — Resorting to a Preceptor

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The Spiritual Preceptor — *acharya* — has an essential place in all the great Wisdom Traditions of the world. Taking refuge in an abstract and seemingly distant Divine Being is somewhat troublesome, but taking refuge in a learned, compassion, caring and wise person is much easier, as such a person is present and approachable. In this age of consumerism and “shopping” how does one know if a “guru” is genuine or not. There are many people who go from one spiritual teacher to another — shopping around for one who will tell them what they want to hear. There is also no lack of “Spiritual Teachers” who are quite willing to tell their disciples whatever they think they want to hear in order to enjoy some economic benefits and thrill of power.

According to the orthodox Vedic tradition the credentials of the acharya are established from the lineage or *sampradaya* to which he/she belongs. No knowledge is considered as valid unless it comes from a Preceptor who belongs to an authorised lineage and actually practices the teaching and lives a spiritual life.

One cannot learn about the Ultimate Truth from the Scriptures through personal reading and self-interpretation — the teaching must come from an authority. In matters of health one does not consult a doctor who is self taught, one goes to a specialist who has studied in a recognised school of medicine. In the same manner in order to understand the Ultimate Truth as it really is, one goes to a properly qualified *acharya-purusha*.

Definition of an acharya

The term acharya means *one-who-teaches-by-example* and according to the Agamas all acharyas — must be possessed of the following qualities.

1. They must be strict followers of the Vedic tradition and therefore faultless in conduct. *vaidika-agresar*
2. They must have unflinching faith in God. *sraddhalu*
3. They must be free of egotism. *nirahamkara*
4. They must understand the three sacred mantras along with the esoteric meaning. *mantravit*
5. They must be able to explain the meaning of the Scriptures to others in a skilful manner. *pravacana-nipuna*
6. They can be living as a householder pursuing the Four Aims but should be free of attachment. *nissangha*

The acharyas must be of unimpeachable conduct and above all, compassionate. The prospective disciple should observe and test them until convinced of their noble character, learning and compassion. The function of an acharya is to interpret and explain the teachings of the Scriptures in harmony with the teachings of the previous acharyas in the lineage (Sampradaya). The acharya is not permitted to formulate and transmit personal theories and indulge in arbitrary self-interpretation and speculation. All new commentaries (bhashyas) on the Scriptures are backed up with copious quotations from previous acharyas to prove that the present rendering is true, in spirit, to the original.

The acharya once chosen and accepted should not be treated as an ordinary person, but as a manifestation of the *Mercy of God*. The acharya is presumably a selfless person dedicated to helping others without any selfish motivation other than altruistic compassion for sentient beings. The acharya is a direct link between the Prapanna and the Lord, and as

such deserves the highest respect and adoration. One should surrender completely to such an acharya because it is only in a spirit of humility that one can learn anything from another. As long as pride and ego have control over the mind one can never absorb or assimilate and practice the teachings. With self-discipline obtained from the service of the acharya one becomes fit for the practice of the dharma.

Categories of acharyas

The acharyas are described as belonging to one of two categories;

1. *anuvrtti-prasanna-acharya* — those who have to be sought out and persuaded with much perseverance to impart their knowledge. It is only after rigorous testing of the prospective disciples that they consent to teach.

2. *kripa-matra-prasanna-acharya* — these acharyas teach their disciples out of compassion for their plight as ignorant and lost Selves, and are constantly seeking an opportunity to impart their knowledge, and are willing to teach anyone who will but listen.

The Reprehensible Delusions of Preceptorship

Pillai Lokacharya has described in Srivachana Bhushan (308 – 310) the three reprehensible delusions of preceptorship which must be avoided by the acharya at all costs. These are:

1. The delusions of 'preceptorship' — thinking of oneself as *the* preceptor — an acharya should think of himself as simply a *conduit* of the Lord's Grace and not as a teacher of sacred lore, this awareness prevents the acharya from developing the egotistical notion of being a great and learned person and having custodianship of spiritual knowledge.
2. The delusions about the role of the disciple — thinking of the disciple as *one's* own personal adherent — the disciple should rather be thought of as a *co-disciple* of the same acharya. Thus the acharya avoids the potential for exploitation inherent in the relationship.
3. The delusions arising from the process of instruction are of four categories:
 - a. seeking to gain financially from the tuition fees.
 - b. the delusion that one is actually facilitating the liberation of the disciple.
 - c. the delusion that one is assisting the Lord in his salvific agenda.
 - d. seeking or expecting social companionship or service from disciples.

The obtaining of an Acharya.

In the wisdom tradition of the East it is axiomatic that the acharya will only come when the disciple is ready. In order to obtain such an acharya, the following 6 factors must be present in the aspirant:

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| 1. Love of God | <i>isvara sauhardam</i> |
| 2. Freedom from animosity | <i>adveshah</i> |
| 3. Perpetual advancement towards the goal | <i>abhimukhyam</i> |
| 4. Providential merit (good karma) | <i>yadrccha sukrtam</i> |
| 5. Frequent association with the devotees. | <i>sattvikaih sambhasanam</i> |
| 6. Divine Grace | <i>bhagavad kataksa</i> |

When these factor are present then the acharya certainly appears in order to mediate the act of Prapatti. The acharya then delivers the teachings by means of the three wisdom tools.

The three Wisdom Tools.

1. *sravana* — listening attentively to the teaching. One must attend lectures and

discourses and listen attentively to the teachings of the *Acharyas*, *sadhus* and *sants*. Fifteen minutes of attentive listening can be more valuable than reading stacks of books!

2. *manana* — reflecting upon the doctrines. One must reflect at great length upon the teachings using reason and logic to understand them from all angles. Any teaching which one does not understand should immediately be clarified from the acharya, repeated questioning is the way to understanding and wisdom.

3. *nididhyasana* — meditation upon the teaching, assimilating it and making it part of one's life. This is the difference between knowledge (*jñana*) and realisation (*vijñana*). Knowing all the facts is not sufficient, one must *realise* and *apply* the teachings in every aspect of one's daily life. Knowledge without practice is useless and a burden, like a donkey carrying a load of sandal wood. The donkey can appreciate the weight but not the fragrance!