

Devotion to the Guru

Shankaracharya (788-820 AD), held, in some traditions, to be the reincarnation of the Buddha, wrote and taught extensively, his best known work being *The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, the latter word sometimes translated as *Wisdom*. In this text the primary emphasis is upon the need of the pupil to be one hundred percent devoted to his or her teacher. He teaches if this is not the case, the Self cannot be realized.

Much of the text consists of poetic expressions of Shankara's great gratitude for his teachers and their predecessors. This gratitude, from another perspective, can be seen as devotion to the teachers and to one's own guru or teacher. Generally speaking, we in the west know little of true devotion, although it can often be seen in parents' devotion to their children, a dog's devotion to its master. We can see various forms of psychological devotion, writ large, or writ small, positive or negative. But of purified, total devotion to true Teachers we see few examples and thus may misconstrue its nature. It has nothing in common with the sad outcomes of misplaced devotion about which we occasionally hear. The best examples of spiritual devotion are to be found in the great scriptures of all religions, the devotion of the disciples for the Teacher.

Many of us are, perhaps, not seeking a True Teacher. What we are seeking is more personal, worldlier. We may attend church, bringing with us mixed motives. We are not yet particularly interested in putting spiritual teachings into practice.

There are those of us who yearn for a Teacher, but do not encounter, nor even know that one could be encountered. We may have a favorite scriptural teaching. That teaching we could make the object of our devotion. This far transcends a mere belief in the teaching, in that one's devotion consists, in part, in the attempt to exemplify the teaching in one's daily life. Such attempts in most cases will result in both internal and external resistance. Such resistance and one's response to it is an important example of the need for self-study. One will quickly discover the regularly appearing points at which one's devotion to the teaching is sorely tempted and sometimes forgotten. These discoveries form the basis of authentic self-study, and of the need for heightened attentiveness. One discovers that true devotion is difficult and that its growth is incremental. Knowing this must not become a rationalization for a less substantial effort to be true to the teachings.

Devotion to the Guru

Others may choose to be devoted to a great Teacher, which devotion cannot be separated from his or her Teachings, or, ultimately, from the mind and heart of the Teacher which are, in fact, one with the Teachings. History's great Teachers have died in body only. Thus, devotion to any one of them is devotion to a living presence, not to a past historical figure.

If one is extremely, karmically fortunate, one will encounter a true Teacher on the physical plane. Whether one recognizes this encounter as such is not a given. This leads to what some teachers have referred to as *the problem of recognition*. How very odd can be the thought that ardently seeking a Teacher one could encounter one without recognizing such. This lends added dimensions to the question of finding and recognizing a true Teacher. This is poignantly portrayed in two novels by Herman Hesse: *Siddhartha* and *Journey to the East*. In both novels, the Teacher being sought had been present but unrecognized as such from the beginning; however, the low status given Teachers caused seekers to overlook them. In neither case did the Teacher fit the preconceptions of the seekers. Nor, in neither case did the teacher make even one overture to the seeker. In each case the recognition eventually occurred, somewhat by the process of elimination. Not all such stories have such a happy ending. Much in fact depends upon the actions or the inactions of the Teacher, bearing in mind that such occur on the mental, emotional and spiritual planes, not merely the physical.

In the case of a seeker recognizing someone to be a true Teacher, and wishing to become his or her pupil, it is all in the approach. There are many modes of expression adopted by Teachers, from pure love to what may appear to be an arbitrary strictness, and apparent cruelty, or to what may be experienced as a liquid fire—"He who is close to me is close to Fire," says Jesus in the *Book of Thomas*.

Whichever Teacher manifestation one encounters and recognizes is taught to be appropriate for that person. Initially the relationship is often a sweet lightness, the goal seems near. One is thrilled: one has at last found one's Teacher. There will typically be other students, some apparently close to the teacher, some less so. One may wish to be among those seemingly close. These are mere appearances coupled with ego-based desires. The Teacher will very likely teach that the near to and far from distinction is

Devotion to the Guru

illusory. It may also be taught that each student must find his or her own orbit around the Teacher, neither too close (for one can get *burned*) nor too far (for one can become *frosty*, or freeze). In reality, the Teacher determines the orbit, not necessarily the same on every plane.

Surfacing thoughts regarding one's nearness or one's distance from the Teacher, especially if they lead to some measure of discontent, can, if heeded, lead to a weakening of one's devotion to the Teacher. This devotion will be tested in myriad different ways before one becomes an "accepted" student. Can one, for example, remain devoted to someone who lies about one's self? Does one feel the need to set the Teacher straight? Has the Teacher not fully understood the student? Why is the Teacher smoking cigarettes? Eating meat? Giving me less time than others? These are all examples of how our lower mind and its preconceptions and expectations can lead us away from the true nature of the teacher and away from the state of true devotion.

Thus, Shankara, in emphasizing his total devotion to his Predecessors is exemplifying his willingness to have become as nothing in their eyes, and thus worthy of receiving Their teachings. To be totally devoted to the Guru is to have become as nothing in His or Her sight. This is the nothing of the child state, not the nothing of the void. The student becomes as a child of the teacher, a receptive pupil with a child-like innocence, coupled with increasingly deepening devotion. The greater the trials learned from and survived, the deeper will become one's devotion to the Teacher and one's state of awe and wonder at the Teacher's majesty. This is archetypically portrayed in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, chapter in which Arjuna beholds Krishna's Divine Form. It is not only the case that "the further one goes, the less one knows," but also is the case that the further one goes, the greater becomes the perceived majesty of the Teacher.

As one moves along, one will encounter certain spiritual conflicts that arise from conditions one has, usually unconsciously, put upon one's willingness to be devoted. This will either cause one to look elsewhere or be revealed to be an opportunity to become more unconditional in one's devotion. Jesus teaches, "Many are called, but few are chosen." Raghavan Iyer stated that many are called, but few are self-chosen.

Devotion to the Guru

Initially, we can ponder the various forms of devotion readily observable in daily life, independent of any judgments regarding their viability. In most cases, it can be observed that the devotion perceived is not unconditional. Unconditional devotion, on whatever level or whatever be its form, participates in the spiritual. This will be difficult to understand for those of us who have not transcended polarity, the pairs of opposites. Thus the question becomes “To what am I unconditionally devoted?” This essay is restricted to an unconditional devotion to a guru, a true Teacher or to one of the world’s great scriptures.

Raghavan Iyer often talked, in various regards, about litmus tests one could employ as helps in self-study. With regard to the objects of one’s devotion, the litmus test consists in noticing in the course of a day how much time in the mind and the heart was spent relative to one’s devotion. This practice will reveal, if one is honest and objective, the priorities of one’s objects of devotion. We seek to move towards occupying our time placing our minds and hearts increasingly on the Teacher and the Teachings, enmeshing practice and daily duties with our every day lives. With continuity of effort this will become easier and easier until the Teacher and the Teachings and our every day lives begin to become one. To the extent that this is the case, one is unaware of it. Proclaiming such awareness signals its lack.

The path of devotion, portrayed in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is said to be one of the most difficult, in that it requires—to use Gandhi’s phrase: “One must reduce oneself to a zero.” All great Teachers teach that one’s entry onto the path can be exhilarating and can even give one a brief glimpse of the goal far ahead. They also teach, however, that after a short time the student begins to encounter the obstacles and obscurations from within that must be overcome if one is to continue moving forward—this being called “the Great War.” It is the war within, the war of the Higher against one’s lower, more elemental, heart and mind. Krishna teaches: “It is difficult, but it can be done.” As one overcomes one’s self, one’s devotion to the Teacher and the Teachings increases. To the extent that fear and pride overcome the seeker, one’s devotion reverts to lesser things or people. Iyer references the question raised by Jesus: “Whom choose ye this day?” And also, Gandhi’s statement: “At each moment, we are either soaring or sinking,” thus illustrating

Devotion to the Guru

the further teaching that in the spiritual life every moment counts. Thus, the development of true devotion is not limited to particular places or times. It is a moment-by-moment practice, involving not only one's devotion but, perhaps more importantly, the motives behind it. Iyer also teaches that authentic, full devotion cannot be achieved if one's motive for its cultivation is not one's love for humanity as a whole. With striking exceptions, this love is developed gradually as one makes progress towards deeper and more expansive states of consciousness. To truly love all of humanity, one must have overcome likes and dislikes, desires and aversions. Thus, devotion to the Teacher and the Teachings is a function of continuity of effort combined with an awareness of one's personal unimportance in the larger scheme of things.

Another important ingredient of devotion is one's increasing awareness that all of one's experiences, all the people that one has met have taught valuable lessons. The greater this awareness, the greater will be the gratitude. This is especially the case regarding Teachers and Teachings. Both the Buddha and Shankara spoke extensively of their gratitude to *Those* who had preceded them leaving behind teachings that they, in turn, could follow and pass on, each in his own way. This has ever been the case, and is the reason all Buddhist Sutras begin with the words "Thus have I heard." This teaching of the *Predecessors* is also found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which states: "There is nothing new under the sun."

The seeker is left to his or her own efforts to overcome, to a significant degree, the lower, elemental nature. When the mind and heart begin to vibrate at a more refined level of life-atoms, they are approaching the vibrations of the Teachers. There begin to be moments of being *en report* with one's Teacher and Teachings. While this brings with it the reality of unconditional devotion to the Teacher, there is, at the same time, a sense of *being at one with*. The understanding of this apparent paradox comes only through the student's initiation into the *solution* to the apparent problem of the one and the many. Moreover, the resolution of the paradox is conveyed through the eyes, not through the mediation of thoughts or words. Perhaps this is a primary reason why Plato, after writing many dialogs, states in *The Seventh Letter*: " I have never written down my true Teachings."

Devotion to the Guru

Raghavan Iyer, in speaking of selfless devotion to one's Teacher, quoted an ancient East Indian: "You are my father, you are my mother, you are my sisters and brothers, you are my enemies and my friends, you are everything to me, My Lord, My Lord."

Barrett Culmback

August 4, 2006