

# The Value of Tradition

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2012-02-29

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/935>

Since I got married I discovered anew that Western people have strange ideas about *gurus*. Is the *guru* an individual or is it something else? While it is true that you do not have an institution without individuals to represent it, it is wrong to think of a teacher of Vedanta only as a person with a special kind of knowledge. This is so because of the tendency of the human mind to project unconscious content. At the same time it is important not to give the instrument a pass when it violates universal values.

In the teaching tradition of Vedanta there is a particular protocol that is involved in asking for knowledge. One brings a bundle of twigs to the *guru* to signify his or her readiness to expose his or her mind to the teaching. There is a certain symbolism in the use of twigs that need not concern us. But it is important to know that self-knowledge comes down through a succession of teachers, none of whom are responsible for the knowledge. It is not “their” knowledge. Knowledge is knowledge and it does not belong to anyone. Vedanta is unique because the knowledge is not derived from the teacher’s own experience although his or her experience confirms it. At first glance this seems to be a defect, but it is actually its strength, assuming that the knowledge does what it purports to do – set the seeker free from seeking – which it does.

And in the Vedanta tradition the method of teaching does not belong to the teacher either, which is another strength. It is an impersonal method that reveals the unexamined logic of the student’s own experience and in the process reveals the knowledge that sets the student free. The teacher then is just the product of a certain institution and, through his or her assimilation of the knowledge and the means of knowledge, becomes empowered to teach.

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So while a specific individual appears in front of the inquirer to teach, the inquirer is actually facing an institution, not a specific individual. It is important to understand this so that whatever unconscious needs that have not been exposed and handled do not find a convenient hook in the form of the teacher. Westerners almost universally have a problem with the idea of touching

the feet of a teacher whereas Indian's don't. This is because Westerners see a person, but Indians see an institution, a tradition. In this ritual, "feet" symbolize understanding because self-knowledge "stands under" every other form of knowledge. So when an Indian touches the feet of a teacher, he or she is touching the tradition, the bringer of the knowledge, not the fleshly feet of an individual. This point was driven home to me with particular force when I became excessively familiar with my *guru* at the beginning of my discipleship. He looked at me icily and said in no uncertain terms, "Remember, Ram, I am an institution."

When I got married I found that it changed my relationship with some people who saw me as a teacher. Three dropped me as a teacher immediately, two took some time to lose interest and two overcame their projections and became better inquirers for it. Several explanations were offered by the droppers, none of which had to do with the eligibility of the student, all of which had to do with some "failing" on my part. But it was not a failing on my part. My ability to teach did not change. I did not change on any level. My *karma* changed and this caused a conflict in the minds of those people because it seemingly contradicted their view of me – which was *karma*-based.

You cannot progress spiritually without being brutally honest with yourself. There are many things about ourselves that contradict our good opinion of ourselves. They must be owned. The reason for the change in these individual's attitude toward me lies in their failure to understand the fact that Vedanta is an institution and the teacher is an institution. If you are attracted to a teacher's personality, it is good, if it increases your attentiveness. But if you have unfulfilled desires for love or security or power, this attraction may inhibit your ability to hear what is actually being said. This incident brought home to me with laser-like clarity the realization that the so-called "inner child," that small person within that has resisted growing up, needs to be faced, educated, disciplined and in every way made to accept the reality of life, to wit: the world is not there to pander to that inner baby's every need, to find a solution for its manifold insecurities. Coming out of the womb of child-think is a painful process, but it needs to happen for the self to free itself from the emotions that bedevil it when it does not apparently know who it is.

In the many years I have been teaching I have found that there is an inordinate interest in relationships among spiritual types. I suppose it is not surprising, because love is the essence of life, but if you are a true seeker you are seeking freedom from relationship. You want the relationship with yourself that obviates the need for human companionship. Self-knowledge does not exclude or inhibit love between people. In fact it makes the connection between all of us completely transparent. So when you approach a teacher you should not see that teacher as a potential mother or father or lover. You should not try to fit them into one of the unexamined boxes in your mind. To do so is to compromise your relationship with truth.

I feel a bit sad for the jealous women who wrote me off when I got married and who thought catty thoughts about my wife. I feel sad if they are still carrying the torch for me. Well, I felt sad on that account when I was not married. I need to be careful when I say this because the same women will say that I am sexist by singling out women. Men project too. They just project differently. They often think I am their father and compete with me or become my good buddy and fraternize with me. They try to act out their childhood issues with me in various ways: challenging, currying favor, one-upping intellectually, etc. It is just that, since we are the same sex, they do not have the same kind of love issues that women have.

I do not feel sad for me or for my wife but for anyone who misuses this great institution. When you bring the twigs it means that you have something to contribute – an open mind – not something to

gain personally, although you do make an incredible gain – the loss of the desires and fears that make life miserable. And by imagining that there is something wrong with me, they do themselves a disservice because they cut themselves off from an opportunity to let the whole tradition flow through them and participate in the wonderful energy of the *sanga*.

The *sanga* that is developing around this teaching is incredibly powerful, and to exile oneself from it for childish personal reasons is foolish. It is not the kiss of death if you do exile yourself, obviously. There is always a way back, but if you have been afforded the rare opportunity to serve a teacher of the Vedanta *sampradaya* and you walk away because your fantasies are not met, it will be a while before you have another opportunity. And going it alone is not ideal. There are too many paradoxes in life and in the teachings to sort out on your own. You need help.

When I say “serve a teacher” I do not mean serve James and James’ ego. I mean understand what tradition means. When you surrender to it, you get the help of all the great beings behind the teacher and the teaching. So it is imperative to keep your mind open to what attracted you in the teacher and the teaching in the first place, not let that undeveloped part of yourself co-opt the process. To find yourself on the outside is like being a fish out of water. It is a lonely and difficult path, whereas surrender to the tradition, not a human being, is the ultimate security.