

Chapter XV. Gurus and Ashrams

Devotee: You must remove a big load from my head, Swami. However much I try to forget it, in whichever direction I turn, I suffer from it; I hear only that! Then how can I dismiss it from my mind? Finding it impossible, I pray to You. Please don't mistake my intention. Kindly give me a direct answer, because if you do, the weight will be lifted from the heads of all people like me, and enthusiasm will increase for spiritual exercises. Otherwise, I'm worried that we may lose even the little faith that we have in the Lord, and I'm afraid we may turn into atheists. Your answer will be of immense help, not only to me but to all devotees everywhere. Therefore, I pray to You to wipe off my doubts without hesitation and tell me the real truth, in very clear terms.

Swami: What is it? Tell me. What is the cause of so much headache?

Devotee: Swami, You told us that people have four stages of life (*asramas*)—student, householder, hermit, and renunciant (*brahma-charya, grihastha, vanaprastha, sanyasin*)—and that those who reach the last stage are indeed blessed, because they attain realisation. Now, please tell us what exactly is that renunciant?

Swami: So this has caused you all the worry! Right? My dear fellow, the wearing of the orange cloth, the shaving of the head, these do not make a renunciant. The renunciant is a person who has given up all desires. The renunciant must be fully immersed—in desire, design, and deed—fully in the One Godhead and in the discipline to attain Him. Whoever is so immersed is a renunciant. Instead, if a person retains all kinds of desires and engages in every activity to realise the desires, then the person is a counterfeit (*sanyasi*) instead of a renunciant (*sanyasin*), as the saying goes. Do you understand?

Devotee: But Swami, now we get counterfeits very cheap for a rupee, a paisa, or even a cigarette! Whom of these should we approach, whom should we accept?

Swami: Why are you concerned with all this? You are concerned with your advancement, your progress. You must crave a person to point out to you the right path for your spiritual exercises (*sadhana*). Or, if that is not possible, you approach and accept your Self—that is enough to give you what you require. Depend upon yourself, and your doubts will be destroyed.

Devotee: In that case, Swami, what about the statement, “*guru-less education (vidya) is sight-less education*”? It is essential to rely on some great person, isn't it? To show the way, I mean.

Swami: Great men have not vanished from the face of the earth, my child! Do not think that all are of the type you mention. There are many great men even now; otherwise, how could the world have daylight, as the saying goes?

Devotee: Great men may exist among householders, hermits, and renunciants, Swami! I haven't much experience with such, but still, I have seen among them people with big name and fame. However, I can say this: it is very difficult to discover really holy men among renunciants. It's impossible to find a single renunciant without some desire or other. When renunciants have so much desire, what is wrong if householders have them? To whichever place we go, the one demand is, “money, money, money!”

Swami: Really speaking, renunciants should have no desire, as you said. Lust and greed are their dreadful enemies. Renunciants should have no contact with them. Renunciants can accept only whatever little food is given, whenever it is offered, that is all. They can have no desire for more. That is the vow, the rule. They have nothing to do with money.

Devotee: Well, Swami, excuse me. Renunciants are perpetually in need of money! No householder worries as much as they do about money! They exploit disciples and extract their hard-earned cash from them. Those who do not give are condemned. Is all this right, Swami? Is this just? Are these people *gurus*?

Swami: No wise person will say that these things are just. How can I say it is right? Why, can't you ask such renunciants once, "Sirs, why do you need the money? Isn't it wrong for you to have this craving for the fame that comes through money?"

Devotee: Oh, I have asked them, Swami.

Swami: What did they say?

Devotee: Some said, they wanted money for their expenses; others said, they wanted to develop their ashrams further. Many such reasons were given. For those who have learned to argue, reason-giving is not very hard. It is only when it comes to believing that we have to choose and discriminate, isn't it?

Swami: The *guru* must engage in the progress of the disciples who come for guidance, and not in the ashram; taking refuge is more important than the ashram. The excitement, the anxiety about the ashram becomes itself a huge burden (*srama*). It is on account of this that people lose even the little faith and devotion that they have and are transformed into atheists. Such *gurus*, instead of giving up all ties, have yoked themselves tighter; they are beasts of burden. My dear fellow, listen to Me, don't cast your looks upon the *guru* who inflicts pressure on a disciple to extract money. Keep as far away as possible from such people; don't lose faith by contact with them. Preserve faith and develop it, all by yourself.

Devotee: We go to such people eager to learn the higher things of life and to know the path for the attainment of the Lord; we seek and search for them, for we don't know which snake lives in which hole, but we find these cobra renunciants and are shocked! The anxious desire that they exhibit for the ashram —isn't that also wrong, Swami? If they want to serve the public like that, they can as well be just ordinary people and retain their original names and go about collecting funds and spending them, right? Calling themselves renunciants and wearing that dress, being initiated into a *mantra* (getting *upadesa*), taking upon themselves numerous vows at the time of initiation into monkhood, declaring that they have destroyed all desire ... if later they follow the path of accumulation, doesn't that spoil the very sacredness?

Swami: That individual may be spoiled, that is all, my dear fellow; the sacredness of renunciants (*sanyasins*) can never be diminished! Don't run away with that idea. Of course, there are such men in the world today. But please don't include them in the list of renunciants or swamis. They have no relationship with these two categories. They only harm their disciples by retaining those designations. Don't spend even a single thought on them.

Devotee: All right, Swami. But for those who have built ashrams and established themselves as *gurus*, this desire for money, etc., is wrong, isn't it?

Swami: Why do you ask? Have these people any special adornment like horns on the head? Really speaking, these people have to be even more careful. They train many disciples, so they must make a special effort to see that the trainees acquire the right attitudes and get fully immersed in contemplation of the Lord. Otherwise, much injury will be caused. If the *guru* pays attention to the spiritual progress and inward joy of the disciples, the disciples themselves will struggle for the development of the ashram. No one need exert any pressure.

Instead, forgetting their progress, if one clamours for so much money from this disciple and so much from this devotee for the development of "his" ashram, one will lose the ashram itself! The disciple will lose devotion

and the *guru* will lose the institution!

Devotee: Besides all this, Swami, if anyone points out to them that it is wrong, they get wild and threaten severe punishments. Is that right, Swami?

Swami: This is an additional wrong. How can it be right? It is not correct for any *guru* to weaken the heart of any disciple; the *guru* must please it and satisfy it. People who frighten and extract are not teachers but cheaters. They are not shepherds but sheep.

Devotee: Then what do you advise us to do? How are we to deal with these people? Please tell us.

Swami: My dear child, give up all talk of people who have lost their way. Speak of your reaching the path. Give up all contact with such people. Instead, cultivate contacts with people and places where there is neither lust, greed, nor any other desire. Seek the *guru* who looks on all with equal love (*prema*).

The real *guru* must have certain qualities. Note this. If these qualities are present, go there and be happy.

If you don't find such a place, meditate on God within yourself. Do meditation and devotional singing. That is enough; you needn't search for another place at all. Whenever you have leisure, read good devotional books. Even from these books, take what you need and discard the rest. Be careful; don't get entangled in all kinds of nets and traps.

Devotee: What are the qualities of those great men, Swami?

Swami: They will neither crave wealth nor have ambition to develop their ashrams; they will neither love those who praise them nor hate those who blame them. They won't prevent their disciples from approaching them; they won't prohibit anyone from approaching them; they won't relish the defamation of others; they won't be vengeful against those who point out to them their own mistakes and wrongs. They will look upon all with equal love; they will always spread truth, righteousness, peace, and love (*sathya, dharma, santhi, and prema*); they will ever yearn for the joy, welfare, and progress of the devotees. Seek such people. They are the true *gurus*.

Don't even cast a glance at those who are afflicted with anger, anxiety, hatred, envy, etc., or those who worry about name and fame and honour and status, however pompous their personality, however resounding their reputation.

Devotee: All right, Swami. It is all very good. But just one little doubt. These big *gurus*, highly learned, giving long lectures for hours together, how is it that they don't realise all this? Can't these big men see their own faults and set them right?

Swami: Well, even an ounce of experience is useful! But a ton of learning may prove useless. Many people lecture in colleges and pour forth hour after hour things they have learned by rote. Can one become great by merely the length or grandeur of lectures one gives? That is like vomiting the swallowed meal.

You must see how much of what is spoken is practised; those who give advice must follow it themselves. If you can't avoid doing a thing, don't ask others to avoid it. So, however learned one may be, unless one has experience and practice, it will be simply a nine-days wonder, and after that one will be neither here nor there.

Of course, the qualities I mentioned are to be noted not merely in the *gurus* but in all. So give up this talk about others being bad or wrong; develop your faith and devotion; strengthen your discipline for meditation on the Lord; engage yourself in beneficial deeds; speak only what will bring good; worship the Lord; keep Him always in the memory; do soft prayer and meditation. If you are immersed in these, you will not worry at all about

the right and wrong of others.

Devotee: Swami, you explained the relationship of the *guru* and pupil (*sishya*). Looking at present conditions, one who reveals the reality is not liked at all. Many of the *gurus*, swamis, and wise aspirants are, as you said, behaving wrongly and in many ways ruining their very name. Besides, they are acting contrary to the vows of renunciation and the *dharma* relating to the Lord.

Such people may not appreciate your statements. They may even develop animosity, because you're laying bare their defects. Or, what is worse, they may try to justify their conduct and invent stories and arguments to make their actions appear correct. Your remarks apply only to the wrong-doers, they don't refer to those engaged in good activities. So, really good wise aspirants and those interested in upholding the ideas will be happy that You have spoken thus. But regardless of what people might say, please Swami, help spiritual aspirants to progress and reveal to us the glory of the Lord.

Swami: Well, what does it matter to Me how people talk? How can falsehood be supported, fearing comment? As the burden so the bearer, says the proverb. Only fakes will resent and comment adversely. The genuine *gurus* will rejoice. As the saying goes, only a thief will feel his shoulder when someone announces the theft of a gourd, because he is afraid that the stolen gourd is actually on his shoulder! Those who don't steal gourds won't feel their shoulders. Those who are genuine will have no fear or anger. The others can learn a lesson if they develop a sense of shame and resolve to mend their ways, at least, hereafter.

For deeds done in ignorance, repentance is the way to make amends and to earn pardon. Not to repeat the same deed is the sign of the morally strong.