What is Gurupasadana?

BR. SAMAHITA CHAITANYA

PART I

Gurupasadana

A person endowed with sādhana-catuṣṭaya (four-fold qualifications) i.e., viveka (discrimination), vairāgya (dispassion), śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti (the six-fold disciplines beginning with śama) and mumukṣūtvara (yearning for liberation) is called an adhikāri or qualified aspirant. Such a person should approach a Guru for the knowledge of vedānta. Reaching the Guru is called 'gurūpasadana' (guru+upa+sadana). Guru means 'Teacher', upa means 'near' and sadana means 'going'. Hence 'gurūpasadana' means 'reaching or going near the Teacher' for the knowledge of vedānta. The knowledge of vedānta is to be obtained by sitting at the lotus feet of the Guru and is not to be pursued independently. Hence all text books of vedānta talk of gurūpasadana. The following is a sample verse from Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's Vākyavṛtti.

Tāpatrayārkasantaptah
kaścidudvignamānasah,
śamādisādhanairuyktaḥ
sadguruḥ pariprccchati.

Scorched by the blazing sun of the three miseries (tāpa), a student, dejected with the world, being endowed with śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti and the other sādhana as enquires of the noble Teacher.

The verse mentions that the adhikāri approaches the Guru and is impatient for means to save himself from the torture of the tāpatraya. This tāpatraya does form a definite impetus for gurūpasadana. But what is tāpatraya?
Tapa-trayam

Tapa means 'affliction, torment or heat'. Trayam means 'three-fold'. So the word tāpatraya means the 'three-fold afflictions'. As we analyse below the three types of afflictions, we shall see clearly how our ancient masters were adept in the art of classification. Even sorrows have been classified! And all of them and that too under just three heads!!

1. Adhyātmika-tāpa:
The word adhyātmika (adhi+ātmika) means pertaining (adhi) to oneself (ātmika). ' Oneself' here does not and cannot refer to the pure ātman but to the gross and the subtle bodies. Diseases of the body; hunger and thirst belonging to the prāṇas; desire, anger, jealousy, greed etc., belonging to the mind; doubts, dilemmas, confusions etc., of the intellect are all causes of pain. It is true that the subtle mental and intellectual pains are many times more agonising than the physical ones. All the sorrows described above, be it physical, mental or intellectual – arise from oneself. Hence these sorrows are called adhyātmika-tāpa.

2. Adhibhautika-tāpa:
The word adhibhautika (adhi+bhautika) means pertaining (adhi) to beings (bhūta). No man is an island. We live in a world populated with other fellow human beings, animals, birds, serpents, plants etc. Ignoble intentions, harsh words, and cruel actions of the people around us cause pain. Terrorist attacks, wars, riots and quarrels – the list of dangers which arise from one’s fellow beings is almost endless. And then there are mosquitoes, scorpions, cobras, tigers and various other ferocious creatures. The afflictions caused by the beings around us are called adhibhautika-tāpa. By definition adhyātmika-tāpa are the pains that have their source from beings which are apart from oneself and are available to one’s perception.

3. Adhidaivika-tāpa:
The word adhidaivika (adhi+daivika) means that which pertains (adhi) to unseen forces

---

1 The tāpatraya are well known to students of the Vedas. After every peace invocation like Sahānāvavatu or Bhadrām karṇebhiḥ, sāntiḥ (peace) is chanted three times, as Om sāntiḥ sāntiḥ sāntiḥ. The three sāntiḥs are for warding off these three sorrows which arise as obstacles while one is pursuing the path.
These sorrows are caused by sources over which we do not have much control. Examples are the scorching summer sun, biting winter cold, thundershowers, floods, earthquakes, dust storms, snow storms, one's residence collapsing all of a sudden etc. Here also the list is endless. Note that these sorrows pertain not to those which have their origin from within oneself (adhyātmika) or from beings which are available to our perception (adhībhautika) but from those forces which are beyond the ken of our perception. These unseen forces are controlled by devatās or you may say that these forces themselves are devatās. The puranas and other smṛtis do describe in certain detail the sorrows which can be caused by classes of beings called yakṣas, rākṣasas, pīṢacās and also by the different grahas (planets) governing one's destiny.

_Tapatrayāksamantsaptapah_

The above sub-heading means ‘tortured by the cruel sun’ of the three _tapas_. A popular Tamil _vedanta_ text _Kaivalya Nāvanītām_ dramatically describes the torture felt by the seeker of liberation (_mumukṣu_), when it exclaims – ‘he suffers like the earthworm roasted alive by the scorching rays of the midday sun’. The following is a verse from _Vivekacūḍāmāni_ wherein Śrī Śaṅkaraścārya picturises in his own inimitable poetical style the torture experienced by the _mumukṣu_. It is in the form of the student addressing the teacher:

_दुर्बारसांसारसावाग्नितप्तपहः दोधूयमानं दुर्क्ष्यवतः। भीतं प्रपन्नं परिपाहि मृत्योः शारणमयं यदं न जाते॥

_विवेकशास्त्रादेशादित्वतारितवे दोधुयमानं_ दुर्बारसांसारसावाग्नितप्तपहः

_भीतं प्रपन्नं परिपाहि मृत्योः शारणमयं यदं न जाते॥

_I am being roasted in the blazing infernal fire of change; I am being tossed by the cruel storms of misfortune; I am terrified. O Lord! Save me from death; I seek refuge in Thee, for I do not know of any other harbour wherein to seek shelter._

Reading this one may wonder – is there so much pain in our life to justify the use of the word ‘torture’?

One may choose to opine that life is a torture only to a rare few. But please think. Is there lasting or true joy in our
lives? Even with the best of comforts, friends and pleasures, a person of true discrimination can see the lurking pain underneath the fun, frolic and excitement. There is no real fulfilment of even one of them. And they always leave us with a gnawing sense of incompleteness. One needs to be very foolish, or highly insensitive not to recognise these pains. He alone can become a true seeker who is intensely aware of these pains. Such a person, tortured by 'living' and extremely impatient to be rid of the agony of samsāra reaches the Lotus Feet of the Guru.

Shocks like the loss of one's near and dear ones or shattering financial crises do help many to turn within and become God-oriented. Yet, this does not mean that all have to go through these types of intense pain to become sādhakas. Also there is no guarantee that those who go through intense pains will become sādhakas. Do remember Bhagavān Buddha—he was a prince and he definitely led a comfortable life. Yet because of inner purity and discrimination he became intensely aware of the sorrowful nature of worldly life. He could not rest until he found a solution to pain and misery.

The Guru

The most simple, true and popular definition of a Guru is 'one who removes ignorance'. Gu stands for ignorance and ru means dispeller. Thus the Guru is one who removes our ignorance. In the spiritual context a Guru is a person who removes the ignorance of the Self. The Mundaka Upaniṣad gives the qualifications of the Guru.

श्रोतिवं ब्रह्माति...।
Tadvijñānārtham sa gurumeva bhūta gacchati
śrotriyaṁ brahmaniṣṭham.

For knowing the Truth ...... one should approach the Teacher who is both a śrotriya and a brahmaniṣṭha.

2 This definition is from the Gurugītā (1.32) of Skanda Purana.

गुकारासंघान्थास्तु रुकासत्त्मस्वप्नोऽधिकृत।
अन्धकारबिनाशितवादु गृहित्याःपिपियते ॥
Gukāraścāndhakāraṣṭu
Rukārastanirodhakkṛt,
Andhakāravināśītvād
Gurūtiyabhidhiyate.
1. Brahmanisṭha: Yah brahmanisṭhaḥ i.e., the one established in Brahman is a brahmanisṭha. He who has direct experience of the Self and knows its true nature as being identical with Brahman is called a brahmanisṭha. Mere book knowledge is not the experience of Truth. Study of the Scriptures has to culminate in the experience of Truth. Erudite lectures lacking the ring of authenticity (and authenticity can come only with experience!) cannot communicate this subtle Knowledge. It has to travel on the fuel of true experience to have its ultimate fulfilment in communicating the nature of the Self to the student. Hence, for a Teacher to be effective, he must be a brahmanisṭha. The Upanishads are replete with declarations stating that only a brahmanisṭha can be a true ācārya of Brahmatīdyā. 

2. Śrōtriya: Śrutavān iti śrōtriyaḥ — one who has listened and understood the Scriptures is a śrōtriyaḥ. Without this qualification even the Self-realised master will not have the language or the technique of expression to convey his profound Knowledge to his disciples. The Scriptures are the only available perfected tools to wake the student up from the realm of illusion to the state of Truth. The Scriptures give the Teacher the words through which the Indescribable can be described. Hence the need for the Guru to be well-versed in the Scriptures. Thus the revered person who is both a man of experience (brahmanisṭha) and endowed with the scriptural knowledge (śrōtriya) becomes a true and a qualified Guru.

A brahmanisṭha who is not a śrōtriya can of course communicate the Truth to the highly evolved — the one who does not need much explanations. We do hear of mouna gurus who hardly speak, but have communicated their experience to a devoted student. But for the general run-of-the-mill students a Guru has to be both a brahmanisṭha and śrōtriya.

Pancha-bheda

The Advaita siddhānta truly declares that there is no duality whatsoever — 'neha nānāsti kiñcana'. Everything is the homogenous Self and the Self alone. This is the final experience of advaita. The Guru should be able to lead a student to this truth. Hence the śāstras explain...
that the Guru is a person who is capable of destroying the five (pañca) kinds of ignorance-based notions of division (bheda), in the student.

The following is the brief description of the pañca-bhedas:

1. Jīva-īśvara-bheda: This is the imagined distinction between Īśvara, the Creator and jīva, the created. Men, cows, pigeons etc. are all examples of jīvas.

2. Paraspara-jīva-bheda: This is the difference between one jīva and another like the distinction between a man, a cow, a pigeon and a tree.

3. Jīva-jāda-bheda: This is the difference between the jīva and an inert object like a stone.

4. Īśvara-jāda-bheda: This is the difference between the Lord and an inert object like a stone.

5. Paraspara-jāda-bheda: This is the difference between two inert objects, e.g. between a table and a stone. Since all these divisions, without any exception, are caused by ignorance, the knowledge given by the Guru destroys all of them. The Guru can do this effectively, only if he is armed with the arsenals of striking examples and the powerful logic of the Scriptures. But these alone are not sufficient. He has to launch them from the pad of his own convincing direct experience. With this we shall conclude the first section of the essay on gurūpasadāna.

There are a few more aspects of this topic which we need to discuss. In the next essay we shall analyse the mode of approaching the Guru, the need of surrender and devotion to him, the endearing service one should render and the questions one should ask the Guru. Further we shall also see why the Guru is absolutely essential in vedānic sādhanā.