

The Teacher, the Student and the Light

A MANUAL OF THE AWAKENING JOURNEY



"The outer guru wakes up the inner guru."



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HEARTMIND

For every seeker, and every teacher who points to the light.



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PART ONE

The Seeker and What Is Sought

Every search begins with a lack. A person feels that something is missing. They may not know what it is. It can come as restlessness, as grief, as a question that will not go away, or as a sudden moment of beauty that then fades. This feeling is the start of the spiritual path. The four traditions in this essay, Kashmir Shaivism, Dzogchen, Sufism and the teaching of Meister Eckhart, all begin here.

Before going further, three terms need to be clear, because the whole essay rests on them.

The first is the seeker and the student. These are the same person. The word seeker describes them while they are looking. The word student describes them while they are learning. A person who feels the lack and starts to look is a seeker. A person who is then taught, by a teacher or by life, is a student. In this essay the two words mean one person at different moments of one journey.

The second is what is sought. It is the light. By the light I mean consciousness itself, the awareness in which everything appears. Each tradition has its own name for it. Kashmir Shaivism calls it Chit, consciousness as light. Dzogchen calls it rigpa, naked awareness. The Sufis call it the light upon light, the heart that reflects God. Eckhart calls it the spark, the ground of the soul. The names differ. The point is the

same. What is sought is not a thing we lack. It is what we are. It is closer to us than our own thoughts.

The third is the means by which the light is found. The traditions call it divine grace. Grace is the light itself turning toward the seeker and revealing itself. It comes in more than one form. It can come as a teacher, a physical person who stands in front of us and points. It can come as life, through circumstances, events and encounters. And it can come directly, from within. These are not three different things. They are three forms of the one grace. The teacher is a form that grace takes. Life is a form that grace takes. The inner light is grace without any outer form at all.

So the journey is not a journey to a new place. It is a journey from not seeing to seeing. This essay is about that journey: about the seeker who walks it, about the light that is sought, about the grace by which it is found, and about the whole relationship between the student, the teacher and the divine.



PART TWO

The Contracted State

If the light is already here, why do we not see it? Each tradition gives its own answer, and the answers agree.

Kashmir Shaivism says that consciousness contracts. It takes itself to be small, separate and incomplete. The tradition calls this the three impurities, or malas. The first, anava mala, is the sense of being limited, of being only this one person. The second is the sense of difference, that I am here and the world is over there. The third is the sense of being bound by action and its results. None of these is a real wall. They are contractions of the one awareness.

Dzogchen says that the nature of mind is covered by ignorance. Not stupidity, but a habit of not recognising. The mind grasps at what appears, takes it to be solid and other, and spins stories around it. The result is confusion, and from confusion comes suffering.

The Sufis speak of the veils. Between the heart and God lie veils of darkness and veils of light. The darkness is the lower self, called the nafs, with its greed, anger and pride. The veils of light are subtler. They are spiritual states and experiences that the seeker mistakes for the goal.

Eckhart says the ground of the soul is hidden by images, by desires and by the clinging self. We are not far from God. We are crowded.

This is the starting point of every seeker. It is confusion, ignorance and the contracted state. It is not a sin and it is not a failure. It is simply where we begin.



PART THREE

The Guru and Grace

What the Word Guru Means

Guru is a Sanskrit word. The old teaching explains it by its two syllables. Gu means darkness. Ru means the one who removes it. The guru is the remover of darkness. The word also means heavy, or weighty, as a person is weighty who carries truth. A guru is not simply a teacher of subjects. A teacher gives you information. A guru turns you toward what you already are.

Notice that the guru does not give light. The traditions are clear on this. Light is already the nature of the student. The guru removes what covers it.

The Means: Grace

How is the contracted state undone? Here the traditions say something that can surprise a modern reader. They say it is not undone by effort alone. Effort has its place. Practice, study and discipline all prepare the ground. But the seeing itself comes as grace.

In Kashmir Shaivism grace is called anugraha, and it is Shiva's own act. The tradition teaches that Shiva does five things: he creates, sustains,

dissolves, conceals and reveals. Concealing and revealing are both his. The contraction is not an accident. The light hides itself in order to find itself again. When the time comes, the same light turns back and shines. The student feels this as a sudden opening, a turning, a recognition.

The other traditions say the same in their own words. Dzogchen speaks of the blessing of the lineage and the pointing out instruction, through which rigpa is seen. The Sufis speak of fadl, the bounty of God, which no one can earn. Eckhart speaks of grace as God's work in the ground of the soul, a work the soul can allow but cannot make.

Grace comes by two main doors. It comes through a teacher, and it comes through life. Most people receive it by both, in different measures. The rest of this essay looks at each door, and then at the one who stands before them.



PART FOUR

The Guru in Each Tradition

Kashmir Shaivism

In Kashmir Shaivism the guru is central. Abhinavagupta says that the guru is Shiva himself, appearing in human form. The guru's work is to transmit grace. In some teachings this happens through a look, a word or a touch, and the student recognises their own nature in an instant. This is called shaktipat, the descent of power. The guru is not trusted for his learning alone. He is trusted because he is established in the Self.

Dzogchen

In Dzogchen the guru gives what is called the pointing out instruction. The teacher introduces the student directly to the nature of mind, so that rigpa is not an idea but a recognition. The practice of guru yoga then unites the student's mind with the guru's mind, and finally with the nature of mind itself. The teaching passes from Garab Dorje down through a line of teachers, each one lit from the one before, like a lamp lit from a lamp.

Sufism

In Sufism the guide is the sheikh, also called the murshid or pir. The seeker takes a pledge of allegiance, called bay'a, and begins to learn from the teacher's presence as much as from his words. The path has stages of annihilation, called fana. First the student dissolves in the sheikh, meaning the ego gives way before the teacher. Then the student dissolves in the Prophet. Then in God. The story of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz shows what this can be. Shams did not teach Rumi a doctrine. He broke open Rumi's heart, and the poetry came from there.

Meister Eckhart

Eckhart is different, because he spoke inside the Church and not inside a lineage of gurus. Yet he too was a teacher and spiritual guide, especially to the nuns in his care. And he taught that the true master is within. Christ in the ground of the soul is the teacher beyond every human teacher. He once said that the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. That is the student and the teacher, and God, seen from the inside.



PART FIVE

When There Is No Guru

What if there is no guru in a person's life? What if no teacher ever appears? The traditions do not say that such a person is lost. They say the light is not limited to human forms.

The guru is not only a person. It can be a circumstance. A loss, an illness, a failure, a long silence, a stranger who says one sentence at the right moment, a book that opens at the right page. Life itself brings people and events in front of the student, and when the student looks honestly at what has happened, something begins to clear. The light teaches through the situation.

Kashmir Shaivism makes this very plain. If grace is Shiva's own act, then it is not tied to any one channel. The Vijnana Bhairava, one of the central texts of the school, gives a hundred and twelve ways into the light, and nearly all of them use ordinary experience. The pause between two breaths. The moment of sudden joy. The shock of fear. The instant before sleep. The sound of music dying away. Each one is a doorway, because in each one the contracted mind loosens for a moment and awareness shows itself. Life is full of such doorways. The student who notices them is already being taught.

Dzogchen speaks of three gurus. The outer guru is the human teacher. The inner guru is the student's own experience, when it is met with

awareness and not with grasping. The secret guru is rigpa itself, the nature of mind. The tradition also knows the pratyekabuddha, the one who wakes without a teacher in an age when there is no Buddha to teach. Such a one is rare, but the possibility is acknowledged. Awakening does not always need a person.

Sufism has the Uwaisi way. It is named after Uways al Qarani, a man of Yemen who lived in the time of the Prophet and never met him in the body, yet who is said to have been taught by him in the spirit. Uwaisi souls are those who are drawn directly by God, without a living sheikh. Sufism also tells of Al Khidr, the Green One, a mysterious figure who appears to seekers at the point of need, in the guise of a traveller, a beggar or a stranger. He is the guide who comes when no guide is there.

Eckhart is the most direct of all. For him the master is within, and God is to be found in all things. He says that a person who has God in the right way takes God everywhere, in the street and among people as much as in church. Every creature is a word of God. Every event can be a teacher for the one who is not clinging.

So the guru is three things at once. It is a person, when a person appears. It is a circumstance, when life itself becomes the teacher. And it is the light within, which is the true teacher in both cases. The person and the circumstance do the same work. They turn the student's face toward what is already looking.



PART SIX

The Student's Attitude

Here the traditions have a great deal to say, and it is perhaps the most practical part of the whole path. Whether the guru comes as a person or as a circumstance, the result depends on the student. The same teacher, the same event, can change one person's life and pass another by entirely. The difference lies in the attitude.

The first obstacle is ignorance of what a guru is. A student may think the guru is an entertainer, or an authority, or a source of answers, or a miracle worker. They may be looking for a parent, a rescuer or a friend. They may be looking for confirmation of what they already believe. A student who expects the wrong thing will not recognise the right thing when it comes. The teaching passes through them and they say, nothing happened.

The second obstacle is pride. This is the self pride that holds its own opinions as final. It is the arrogance that says, I know already. It is the hidden comparison with the teacher, looking for mistakes, looking for a reason not to learn. Every tradition names this as the great barrier.

The Qur'an gives the story of Moses and Al Khidr. Moses was a prophet, a great and learned man. He asked to follow Khidr, and Khidr told him he would not be able to be patient. Then Khidr did things that seemed wrong. He damaged a boat. He killed a youth. He rebuilt a wall for people

who had refused them hospitality. Moses could not hold his tongue. He judged each act by what he already knew. Only at the end did Khidr reveal the hidden reasons, and Moses saw that his own knowledge had been too small. The story is about the student who cannot let go of his own opinion.

Kashmir Shaivism names the same problem as *anava mala*, the sense of being a limited, separate person, and as the ignorance of the intellect, which grasps concepts and mistakes them for truth. The clever mind can be the last thing to give way.

The Tibetan tradition has a well known teaching about three faults of a pot. A pot may be upside down, so nothing goes in. This is the student who does not listen. A pot may have a hole, so everything leaks out. This is the student who hears and forgets. A pot may be dirty, so whatever goes in is spoiled. This is the student who comes with fixed ideas, and turns every teaching into more of the same.

The Sufis speak of *adab*, which means right conduct and courtesy before the teacher and before God. The Sufi view is that the lower self, the *nafs*, refuses to bow. Its pattern is shown in the story of Iblis, who was commanded to bow before Adam and refused out of pride. He said, I am better than him. The sin of Iblis is the sin of the student who will not be taught because he thinks he is already above it.

Eckhart's answer is poverty of spirit. He says the poor person is one who wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing. This is not about money. It is a state of emptiness, in which the soul does not insist on its own will, its own knowledge or its own possessions. He also says that the eye must be free of colour in order to see colour. A mind full of its own views cannot see what is in front of it.

What, then, is the right attitude? It is humble, honest and willing to be wrong. It listens. It does not need to win. It can say, I do not know. It can

stay with a question without rushing to an answer. It can look at its own faults without hatred and without excuse.

This is not low self worth. The traditions are firm on this. Humility is not self contempt. A student who thinks they are worthless is as stuck as one who thinks they are superior, because both are still thinking about themselves. True humility is simply seeing clearly what is the case. It is lightness, not heaviness. The student is a vessel of the light, and the task is not to be ashamed of the vessel but to keep it open.

Two familiar sayings belong here. The first is, when the student is ready, the teacher appears. It is often credited to the Buddha, but it is not found in his teachings. It is usually traced to Theosophical writing of the nineteenth century. Even so, the idea behind it is old and widely held. The teacher appears when the student can see. In other words, the teacher may have been there all along, in a person, a book or an event, and the student's readiness is what turns the meeting into a teaching.

The second saying is, when we take one step toward the divine, the divine takes a thousand steps toward us. This is often credited to Rumi, but no clear source is known. Its root is a saying that Muslims hold to be the words of God, passed on through the Prophet, called a hadith qudsi. It says that if a servant draws near to God by a span, God draws near by an arm's length. If the servant comes walking, God comes running. A similar thought is found in the letter of James, which says, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. The wording changes from place to place, but the teaching is constant. The student's small turning is met by something far greater. This is grace again, and it is why the first step matters so much.

An attitude like this changes everything. A student with the right attitude meets the guru differently. If the guru is a person, they listen without defence, and the teaching goes in. If the guru is a circumstance,

they ask what it is showing them, and not why it is happening to them. The same event, met with openness, becomes a doorway. The same event, met with pride, becomes a wall. The teacher is the same. The student is not.



PART SEVEN

The Right Teacher at the Right Time

There is a deeper point that the traditions share, and it goes beyond the student's attitude. The meeting with a teacher is not chance. It is timed. The teaching that arrives is the teaching the soul can use at that stage, and no other. This is the mystical side of the relationship. It is not arranged by the student, and it is not fully understood by the teacher.

Kashmir Shaivism teaches this directly. Abhinavagupta describes grace as coming in degrees, strong, middling and mild, according to the ripeness of the one who receives it. The tradition calls the ripening of the impurities *malapaka*. When the time comes, grace descends. And the school says the Lord himself is working through the guru. The guru does not choose the student by taste or by chance. Shiva brings the two together when the student is ready. In this view the meeting is already an act of grace, before a single word is spoken.

Dzogchen and the wider Tibetan tradition hold that the student's karma and the teacher's connection to the student are bound together. A teacher is met because of a link that was made long before. The tradition also teaches that the Buddha taught differently to different people, according to their capacity and need. There is no single teaching for all. The same truth is given in the form that a particular person can take in.

This applies to the student's whole life. At one stage a student needs the stern teacher. At another a gentle one. At another a teacher who simply sits in silence.

The Sufis say that the seeker does not really choose the sheikh. The sheikh, in a deeper sense, chooses the seeker, or rather God joins them. The Quran shows this in the story of Moses and Al Khidr. Moses was told to travel to the meeting place of the two seas, and there he would find a servant of God who had been given knowledge from God's own presence. The journey was guided before Moses understood why. The Sufis also distinguish the sheikh of instruction, who teaches the outer forms, from the sheikh of the way, who guides the heart. A student may need one, and then the other, at different times. The great Sufi teacher Ibn Ata Allah wrote a warning that points the same way: do not keep company with one whose state does not lift you and whose words do not lead you to God. The right company is known by what it does to the heart.

Meister Eckhart says that God is bound to pour himself into the soul as soon as he finds it ready. He does not hold back, and he does not wait for a better day. The readiness itself is the opening. If God is always giving, then the timing of what is given is set by the soul's capacity to receive. The teaching a person meets is the teaching they are able to meet.

From all this comes a plain truth about the path. Because the teacher is given according to the soul's development, the teacher may change as the soul grows. This is not a betrayal. A student who has learned to walk may need someone who teaches running. A student who has been taught the forms may need someone who points beyond them. Some teachers are given for a season. Some are given for a lifetime. The root of the relationship is not the person. It is the soul's relationship with the divine, which uses each teacher in turn.

In the Tibetan tradition a student may study with many masters, yet still hold one as the teacher through whom the nature of mind was first recognised. Great masters of the tradition studied under dozens of teachers. In Sufism, teachers sometimes send their students on to another guide when their own work is done. In every tradition, a teacher who is free of ego is glad when the student goes further.

There is a caution here as well. The student must not confuse growth with restlessness. A student who leaves each teacher the moment the teaching becomes hard, or the moment pride is wounded, is not outgrowing anyone. They are running from the mirror. The traditions say that a change of teacher is real when it comes with gratitude, with no bitterness, and with a deepening of humility. It is false when it comes with blame, with boredom, or with a hunger for something more exciting. The test is the same as always: does it lead toward the light, or toward the self?

So the student can trust the timing. If no teacher has come, the soul is not ready for a teacher yet, or it is being taught in another form. If a teacher has come, the soul needs this teaching now. If the teacher passes out of one's life, a new stage has begun. The student's task is the same at every stage: to stay open, to be honest, and to keep turning toward the divine. The divine is the true teacher behind every teacher, and it knows exactly what each soul needs and when.



PART EIGHT

The Sacred Relationship

Between Two People

When a human guru does appear, there is a bond unlike any other. It is not friendship, and it is not the bond of employer and employee. It rests on trust, surrender and truth.

The student brings readiness and sincerity. The student must also be willing to be seen without defence. The guru brings presence, clarity and care. A true guru wants nothing from the student, not money, not power, not admiration. The guru's aim is the student's freedom, and in the end, that the student no longer needs the guru as a separate person.

The traditions say that this bond is the fastest way, and also the most delicate. Because it asks for deep trust, it can be misused. This is why all four paths insist that a true teacher is known by their life: humility, steadiness, and love that does not take. The teaching is meant to free the student, not to bind them.

A student also has a duty here. Trust is not blindness. The tradition asks for discernment before the bond is made, and honesty within it. A student who gives up their own judgment entirely has not become humble. They have only found another way to avoid looking within.



PART NINE

The Guru as God

Here the traditions say something that can seem strange at first. They say the guru is God. The Guru Gita, a text much loved in the Shaivite tradition, says that the guru is Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and the highest reality itself. The Dzogchen teachings say the guru is the Buddha. The Sufis say the sheikh is the mirror of the divine.

This does not mean the human personality is God. It does not mean the guru's habits or opinions are holy. It means that the guru is a window. What shines through the window is not the guru's own. It is the one light, appearing as a person.

And this is true of the other forms of the guru as well. When life itself is the teacher, the same light is working through the circumstance. The face changes. The light does not.

And here is the deepest point. The guru is not only outside. The guru in the form of a person, or of an event, points to the guru within, the Self, the nature of mind, the ground of the soul. In the end all of these are the same. The outer guru wakes up the inner guru. When the student recognises the light, the student sees that it was never the guru's light alone. The guru and the student are two appearances of the one awareness, and both bow to it.

This is why in these traditions the guru also bows. The guru does not stand above the student as an owner of truth. The guru stands beside the student, facing the same light. Both relate to the guru as God, which means both relate to what is in each of them and beyond them.



PART TEN

What This Means for the Path

Let us put the whole journey in a few lines.

We begin in the contracted state, in ignorance and confusion. We feel a lack, and we go looking. This is the seeker. What the seeker looks for is the light, and the light is not far away. It is what we are. It is hidden only by our own habit of not seeing.

The means by which it is found is grace. Grace comes through a guru, who may be a physical teacher, or a circumstance, or the light within speaking directly. Most often it comes through all of these, in the order that life provides. Whichever form it takes, it is the light itself turning toward the one who seeks.

The student's task is to be ready. The student is the seeker, now being taught. That means to be humble, honest and open. It means to watch for pride and to put it down. It means to take the first step, and to trust that it will be met. It means to treat every person and every event as a possible teacher, and to ask what each one is showing.

The student can also trust the timing. Teachers come when they are needed and go when their work is done. A new teacher may be given as the soul grows, and this is the same grace in a new form. The student who understands this does not cling to a teacher and does not run from one. The student keeps faith with the light that sends them all.

If a human guru appears, the student honours the bond, keeps their discernment, and receives what is given. If no guru appears, the student does not despair. Life is teaching. The light is working. The doorways are everywhere.

And the path ends in the same place, whichever way it is walked. The student sees that the one who searched, the one who taught, and the light that was searched for were never three. There was only the one light, appearing as a seeker, as a guru and as the world, and finally knowing itself.

The relationship is a gift. It asks to be honoured and then, in time, to be outgrown, not by turning away from the teacher, but by finding that the teacher was the light all along, in a human face, in a circumstance, and in oneself.



*With love,
Hosshin*

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