



Guru Disciple Relationship on the path to Self-Actualization in context of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

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Abstract

The Eastern philosophy has always reckoned this tradition in high esteem as the insights and spiritual guidance that the gurus offer to their disciples enlightens them helping them to navigate through the vicissitudes of life in a peaceful manner. The present paper endeavours to throw light on few of such sacred relationships borrowed from the vast treasure of Indian philosophy. The following journey includes the study of indelible relationships between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, Lord Yama and Nachiketa, Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda that would eventually help to investigate the gradual development of the divine relationship between Vasudev and Siddhartha in Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*.

Keywords: Guru, Disciple, Spirituality, Self-actualization, Truth, Devotion, Surrender, Grace.

The guru-disciple relationship witnesses a sacred and devoted bond that thrives on the mutual understanding between the two. This pious connection trails down the ages serving as a spiritual and moral foundation for humanity in general. It finds its roots spread across various religions and cultures, especially in Eastern philosophies that include Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. However, similar trends and traditions can be seen in some other religious contexts as well. The main purpose of the relationship is to transmit knowledge and spiritual insights to the seeker who is just like an empty vessel ready to be filled by the grace of his guru. The guru tests the sincerity and capability of the seeker before accepting him as his disciple. Once satisfied by the ardent pursuit and enthusiasm of the devotee, he pours out his essence into the empty vessel of the disciple.

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One of the most ancient and well-known examples of the guru-disciple dynamic in Hinduism is found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a classic Indian epic. In this narrative, the warrior prince Arjuna, who is having a moral and emotional breakdown on the Kurukshetra battlefield, has Lord Krishna as his spiritual mentor. *The Bhagavad Gita* is a dialogue that happens between Lord Krishna and Arjuna right before a major battle breaks out. Arjuna feels torn about joining the struggle, since the other side includes his own friends, family, and instructors. He strives to balance his love and compassion for his family with his responsibilities as a warrior. At that point of time, Lord Krishna acts as the charioteer of Arjuna and gives him deep spiritual insights. Krishna answers Arjuna's questions, offers advice on righteous conduct, and outlines various paths to enlightenment. The lessons address duties (dharma), morality, selflessness, dedication, and the nature of the Self.

The Gita presents the theory of the three paths, i.e., the *Jnana Marg*(path), the *Bhakti Marg*, and the *Karma Marg* in a harmonious manner. According to Lord Krishna, the people with rational temperament shall practice *Jnana Yoga*, the one who are emotional shall follow the *Marg* of *Bhakti Yoga*, while the ones who pertain active temperament shall devote themselves to the *Karma Yoga*. In *The Gita*, the lord instructs Arjuna that emotion, action, and intellect are the three horses of this body-chariot and one shall keep them in perfect harmony to move the body-chariot smoothly. Only then he can rejoice in the self while singing the song of *Soham* (I am He). (SivanandaSwami xv) Lord Krishna guides Arjuna in the light of wisdom when he finds Arjuna in a state of despondency and confusion while selecting the path between his duty and attachment to his loved ones. The guru in the form of Lord Krishna gives Arjuna the required shelter who has surrendered himself completely to his master. Krishna encourages him by saying: "Thou shalt come even to Me. I pledge thee My Truth (word); thou art dear to Me." (Sivananda Swami xxi)

Throughout the dialogue that goes between Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield, the Lord motivates Arjuna to overcome his doubts and worries, carry out his duty of a Kshatriya, and stand up for justice. Arjuna's metamorphosis and preparedness to carry out his task with a sense of detachment and dedication are the culmination of *The Bhagavad Gita*. *The Bhagavad Gita's* portrayal of Krishna and Arjuna's relationship represents the traditional guru-disciple dynamic, in which the guru offers spiritual guidance to the disciple to help him overcome obstacles in life. *The Bhagavad Gita* is still regarded as a classic literature in Hindu

philosophy, and its lessons are ageless in nature, providing instruction on responsibility, ethics, and the quest for enlightenment.

Another such example can be witnessed from the *Katha Upanishad*. It deals with the story of Lord Yama, the god of death, as the guru of Nachiketa. In this philosophical work, *The Upanishad* discusses the nature of reality, the *atman* or self, and *brahman*, the ultimate truth. After a sequence of events, the young child Nachiketa became a follower of Yama. It so happens that Vajasravasa, the father of Nachiketa, carries out a sacrifice ceremony (yajna) in which he is required to give up everything he owned. But Nachiketa notices that his father is parting with old, useless livestock. When Nachiketa sees this, he becomes worried, and to recompense, inquires his father as to whom would he be proffered to as a part of the sacrifice. In a fit of rage, Vajasravasa answers Nachiketa by stating that the deity of death, Yama, would receive him. Nachiketa makes the unwavering decision to go and find Yama and offer himself as the sacrificial ritual, fully committed to keeping his father's word.

When Nachiketa enters Yama's dwelling, he discovers that the deity of death is absent. Nachiketa is left without any hospitality for three days. Upon his return, Yama is awestruck by Nachiketa's perseverance and resolution. Yama bestows three boons upon Nachiketa in recognition of his unwavering devotion, allowing him to request everything he wished for. In his first boon, Nachiketa asks for his father's heart to be reconciled and at peace. When Yama has granted him the first boon, he tries to find out about the details of fire sacrifice in the second boon that would help the mortals, who are always disturbed by a fearful and an uneven existence, attain mental peace and harmony and a fearless life of purpose. In response to it, The Lord of Death accedes and teaches him about the Sacrificial fire and even names it after Nachiketa, as *Nachiketa Agni*.

In the third wish Nachiketa requests the knowledge about the nature of *atman* (the eternal self) and the consequence of the soul after death. Initially, hesitant to grant this boon that contained the knowledge of *Brahma Vidya*, as Yama was doubtful of the competence of the young boy to understand the intricacies of it, he tempts Nachiketa with other gifts of material benefits, power, progeny, and so on, but determined Nachiketa refuses any of them as they are transitory and futile. Closely observing Nachiketa's persistence, Yama eventually relents and reveals the secrets of *Brahma Vidya* haltingly "The instruction starts with an enunciation of *Sreyas* (the result of right conduct) and *Preyas* (Pursuit of worldly pleasures binding to *Samsara*)."(Narasimha Acharya, 19). He further tells him about *Vidya* and *Avidya*. *Vidya* is a disciplined performance of action with the focus on God realization, whereas *Avidya* is the action done with the motive of worldly progress and pursuits of material gains without keeping God as the central thought. While opening the secrets of *Brahma Vidya*, Yama reveals to him the true nature of God saying that He is omnipotent and cannot be perceived by the efforts of human being and the only means to attain such realization is His Grace.

And to secure His Grace, one shall worship him devotedly by living a pious life full of discipline and Sacrifice. Yama further explains him of the soul's journey after death, wherein the body perishes diffusing into its original components, while the soul sets for its next sojourn, and according to its previous Karma, takes another body. The relationship between Yama and Nachiketa is a true example of a genuine seeker of truth who shows great patience and devotion in his earnest desire to gain knowledge and a promised guru who bestows his grace upon his worthy disciple benevolently.

The relationship between Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Paramhansa is a significant example of the guru-disciple dynamics in the spiritual landscape of nineteenth century. Swami Vivekananda, whose original name was Narendra, was a man of reason and intellect. When Ramkrishna first met Narendra at the house of Surendranath Mishra, he was highly impressed by Narendra's singing and invited him to visit at Dakshineswar temple.

Narendra was an ardent seeker of truth and carried a deep longing to know God. In his very first meeting with Ramakrishna, he asked him if he has seen God to which the latter responds "Yes, I see him as clearly as I see you, only much more intensely."! (Makarand, Paranjape R. 48) This answer surprised Naren and it became a starting point of transformation in his life.

When he visited to Ramakrishna for the second time, Ramakrishna, who was aware of Naren's potential and his evolved state as a sage in his previous birth, placed his right foot on Naren's chest. That touch dimmed the senses of Naren and the whole world including himself, seemed to vanish before his eyes. Feeling that he was dying, he cried, "Sir, what are you doing to me? I have parents, brothers, and sisters at home," (Makarand, Paranjape R.. 49). Ramakrishna laughed and restored him to consciousness saying that everything will take place in due time.

Despite being amazed and touched, Naren remained sceptical. He questioned whether he had experienced a hallucination or hypnosis. Nevertheless, the overpowering truth of the heightened states of consciousness that Ramakrishna instilled in him forced his positive bent of mind to succumb. When Ramakrishna touched him once again during his third visit, Narendra completely lost consciousness. Because Ramakrishna considered Vivekananda to be a highly advanced soul who had come to the earth for the benefit of humanity, he bestowed these blessings onto him.

Narendra acknowledged a supersensual realm of awareness only after experiencing the superconscious state of samadhi, which was bestowed upon him by Ramakrishna. Under Ramakrishna's guidance, he started to truly realise that besides physical senses there were other sources of knowledge. He was compelled to accept that there were multiple levels of awareness in addition to the fact that Brahman, also known as the Supreme Spirit, permeated the entire cosmos and that matter itself was conscious and not untouched with the permeation of Brahman. Ramakrishna guided him to the truths of higher realms concealed

behind appearances rather than compelling him to abandon his beliefs. He instructed him to pray to God and use even his scepticism for spiritual gain and upliftment.

With the grace and guidance of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda experienced great spiritual visions, including a direct view of the Divine. These experiences profoundly influenced Vivekananda's conception of spirituality and his commitment to disseminate the Vedanta teachings which eventually culminated in a significant address that he delivered at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. The relationship between Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is a unique example of guru- disciple dynamics which sheds light on the transformative potential of spiritual guidance and the transfer of insight from teacher to pupil.

In Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* too, the reader witnesses a natural sprouting and development of a divine relationship between Siddhartha and Vasudev. The protagonist Siddhartha is on a constant journey to Self-actualization. Accumulating varied experiences on the way, he meets his guru, Vasudev, a ferryman, in normal circumstances, unaware of the purpose that the ferryman would serve in future while teaching him the secret lessons of life in the most simplistic manner. Born in a brahmin family, Siddhartha in his youth converses with learned men, chants *Om* silently on the rhythms of his breath and meditates for hours. His father is happy to see him growing as an intelligent and learned man as if a prince among the Brahmins. But the Siddhartha's soul is desperate, restless, and uneasy. He would often question himself about Brahman, the goal of the Self, the dwelling of this Self, the whereabouts of the innermost regions of a being and so on. His insatiable longing to know his true Self would carry him to the ceaseless chain of thoughts that would further relentlessly insist him to find some worthy and wise person who could bring comfort to the untouched regions of his heart "But where were the Brahmins, the priests, the wise men, who were successful not only in having this most profound knowledge, but in experiencing it?" (Hesse, *Siddhartha*6)

Siddhartha's life bears a parallel to Nachiketa's as Nachiketa was driven to the abode of Lord Yama to know the true meaning of sacrifice and the reality behind it, so did Siddhartha bid farewell to his father to become a Samana to get the answers to his queries. While practicing self-denial and meditation, he learns a great deal in the company of the Samanas. But after each activity of losing the Self, he had to return in the same Self again from which he always wished to flee. His admittance to Govinda is a proof of his tormenting state "But that I, Siddhartha, only find a short respite in my exercises and meditation, and am as remote from wisdom, from salvation, as a child in the womb, that Govinda, I do know." (Hesse, *Siddhartha*14). The dissatisfaction that fills the being of Siddhartha is due to his strong attachment to the lower self and the desire to get rid of it. That is why, Krishna advises Arjuna in *The Gita* to act with detachment, simultaneously devoting the fruits of his actions unto Him. The strong attachment to one's desires disturbs the harmony of the inner self, thus leading to fear and anxiety. On the contrary, complete surrender of oneself at the feet of the guru, the

embodiment of God, spares one of the agonies born of expectations. Siddhartha's journey to achieve the desired goal takes him to the Buddha, the Illustrious One, who was highly respected and appreciated by everybody around. Siddhartha hears the teachings of Gautam with keen interest and devotion. But he realizes the fact that the teachings of Buddha cannot tell him the secret of what the Illustrious One has experienced himself. The reason and intellect that had turned Swami Vivekananda into a sceptic to the teachings of Swami Ramkrishna Paramhansa perfectly highlights here in the mental formations of Siddhartha against which even the Buddha warns him. The constant flow of thoughts makes him more abiding in himself than ever and with this awakening, he enters the world of pleasure and sorrow. He decides to hear the commands of his inner voice just as Gautam had listened when he sat under the bodhi tree in the hours of his enlightenment.

On his way, he meets a ferryman, Vasudev and asks him to take him across the river. During their conversation, initiated by Siddhartha, Vasudev tells him that one can learn much from the river if listened to it attentively. The seed of their impending relation is sown with this meeting. At the time of their farewell, Vasudev instructs him, through the medium of the river, that everything in this world comes back, and so, Siddhartha will also come back to him one day. Throughout the novel, the regular appearance of the river and Siddhartha's intense observance of it indicates the implicit significance of the river in his life. It has always prompted Siddhartha to reflect on the meaning of life and its divergent aspects. The concept of reflection and deep contemplation has always been highly glorified in the Hindu philosophy as it helps the man to look inside and purify himself of his faults.

After Siddhartha had indulged his senses in worldly pleasures to the degree of nausea, disgust and disillusionment enveloped his soul completely. Eventually, he reaches along riverside with the thought to annihilate himself. The river shows him his distorted and wasted face through his reflection in the water, simply as the guru turns his disciple inwards and shows him his weaknesses and the way out of it. Siddhartha hears the voice of *Om* from some remote part of his soul which awakens him to his folly to destroy himself. His glance on the river reveals to him a great similarity between his life and the flow of river.

The continuous flow and the simultaneous presence of the river draws upon him the reflection on the continuity and newness of life which fills him with happiness and enthusiasm. When he reaches the ferry, he comes across the same ferryman, Vasudev, whom he was longing for so eagerly. Nachiketa and Siddhartha both had to wait for their respective gurus to teach them the secrets of life; and just as Lord Yama tested the patience and devotion of Nachiketa, so also Vasudev recognized in Siddhartha the inner longing for wisdom and truth. It is this burning sensation in Siddhartha that makes Vasudev invite him to his hut. He offers the hungry Siddhartha food and water and listens to his life-journey and grievances. Siddhartha finds a greatly attentive listener in Vasudev who absorbs every single word in him and comprehends Siddhartha's experiences in depth. Siddhartha wishes to learn this art of sound listening from Vasudev, who further guides

him towards the river. Vasudev tells him that the river has taught him of the importance to strive downwards, to sink to the bottom only to seek the depths of eternity.

Vasudev has his own simple, yet profound ways to interact with the river and nature. He is a man of few words. In his company, Siddhartha learns to listen patiently with open heart, without any passion, desire, or judgement. Living happily beside the river, ceaselessly learning from it, a new secret opens before Siddhartha that time is just the imagination of mind and nothing else. The ruminations of the past or the dreams of the future are simply illusions and that whatever occurs, it is only in the present. So, one shall learn to live in the now “That the river is...shadow of the future?” (Hesse, *Siddhartha*88)

Vasudev guides him about the secret to flow constantly like the river without getting entangled in the obstacles on the way. The same message was delivered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna when he asks him to perform his duty with objectivity and devotion; surrendering the fruits of his actions at His feet.

Siddhartha's evolution was taking place gradually in the company of Vasudev. It became more evident when he dealt with the death of his beloved Kamala with calmness and peace “In this hour he felt more acutely the indestructibility of every life, the eternity of every moment” (Hesse, *Siddhartha*94). But after his only son, hard-hearted and mischievous, runs away leaving him alone, Siddhartha experiences unbearable agony and restlessness. When Arjuna was in a despondent mood, seeing his own relatives standing against him in the battlefield, he bows before Shri Krishna to guide him in the hour of crisis. Here Siddhartha seems to admit about his folly the same way to Vasudev, who as usual, lends his ears to Siddhartha's grievances; but this time with more attention and more absorption. Siddhartha notices the fact of Vasudev, being a motionless listener, absorbing in everything just like a tree absorbs the rain “that this motionless man was the river itself, that he was God Himself, that he was eternity itself.” (Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 107). Vasudeva asks Siddhartha to listen to the voice of the river with more profundity and silence. When Siddhartha begins to listen completely absorbed, he hears many thousand voices of sorrow, pain, pleasure, suffering, and so on, merging with the voices of the river. But when Siddhartha does not bind himself to any one voice, but hears all the voices collectively, in a whole, he realizes the unity underlying them and those thousands of voices turn into one great song, of one word: *Om*- the Perfection.

Siddhartha finds his wound healing, pain vanishing away into eternity; his Self, from which he had always strove to flee away, merging into unity. From that moment, he stopped to fight against his destiny and acceptance of everything prevailed in him. His Being permeated with the light of interconnectedness of whole life and he settled into peace. Vasudev smiled with radiance on his face, knowing that Siddhartha has attained the Ultimate and bade him farewell.

The steadiness and peace that reflects in the life of Vasudev resembles the serenity and consistency in the flow of the river, that eventually, pervades the whole being of Siddhartha. The purity and sacredness that

pervades the guru-disciple relationship has enlightened the lives of many including Siddhartha and, hopefully, would continue to do so in the distant future as well.

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