

GURU SHISHYA RELATIONSHIP

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP AND
EXPECTATIONS IN THESE CHANGING TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

This 9th Webinar organised by Pallavan Learning Systems, in association with Ritinjali and Centre for Escalation of Peace, explored the ever-evolving nature of the 'Guru Shishya' relationship. The 'Guru Shishya' relationship has undergone significant changes over the course of time. With every major revolution, be it agrarian, industrial, scientific or technological, we are constantly exploring the ever-changing facets of this 'Guru Shishya' relationship. Since the breakout of COVID-19 pandemic, this relationship has experienced many challenges. Learnings from these challenges define a whole new spectrum of knowledge-transfer and understanding. One major shift has been the advent of online platforms and the engagement of learning being primarily online without any in-person interaction between teachers and students.

The webinar was moderated by Dr. Fazal Rizvi and Jai Kapoor. The panel consisted of the following seven speakers: Ven Geshe Tenzin Damchoe, Prof Malavika Karlekar, Ugyen Jigme Rangdrel, Dr. Kavi Arya, Sonia Bashir Kabir, Kaushiek Pranoo, and Shikha Vats. The webinar was attended by a total of 162, from various countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and the United States. The audience members had a diverse range of occupations such as analysts, counsellors, doctors, editors, teachers, therapists, writers, and a large number from the field of education. The moderators and panellists engaged in a conversation about the interchangeability of the Guru Shishya relationship and how best learners can create an environment of mutual growth and learning. The hour and a half proved to be far too short for the lively discussion, that included active engagement from the audience and a rigour debate among the panellists.

ABOUT THE MODERATORS



FAZAL RIZVI

Emeritus Professor

University of Melbourne, Australia &

University of Illinois, USA

Dr. Fazal Rizvi is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne and at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Rizvi's disciplinary background is in Philosophy, but much of his research has addressed issues in education policy. Recently, his research has focused on issues of identity and culture; global mobility of students; and theories of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education.



JAI KAPOOR

Student, Brown University, USA

An alum of Vasant Valley School, India

Jai Kapoor is a former student of Vasant Valley School. He is presently studying Mathematics and Economics at Brown University, USA. He is particularly interested in the shifts in the learning process in today's times, with the blurring of lines between the Guru and the Shishya, especially with the rapid progress of technology.

ABOUT THE PANELLISTS



GESHE DAMCHOE

Lecturer & Coordinator

Sarah College of

Higher Tibetan Studies, India

Ven. Geshe Tenzin Damchoe completed his B. Com at St. Philomena's College of Mysore University. He studied Buddhist Philosophy at Buddhist Dialectic School at Dharamsala and received a Geshe degree (Ph.D.) from Drepung Loseling Monastery, India. He is a visiting scholar at Earlham College, USA, Tibet Fund, USA, and Oxford University, England. At present, he is engaged as a lecturer and coordinator at the Sarah College of Higher Tibetan Studies, Dharamsala, India.



MALAVIKA KARLEKAR

Academic & Editor

Indian Journal of Gender Studies, India

Professor Malavika Karlekar is Editor of Indian Journal of Gender Studies and Curator of *Re-presenting Indian Women: A Visual Documentary, 1875-1947* and of the annual calendar based on archival photographs of women, all at Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. She has authored several books and is also Editor of the Women and Photography, the online newsletter of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts. Educated at the Universities of Delhi and Oxford,

Karlekar has been a university teacher and researcher. Since 2001 she has been writing on archival photographs, treating them as material objects that can help in understanding social relationships, cultural paradigms and changes in people's lives.



UGYEN JIGME RANGDREL

Student, NIIT University, India

An alum of The Royal Academy, Bhutan

Ugyen Jigme Rangdrel is an alumni of The Royal Academy, Paro, Bhutan. He is currently pursuing computer science and engineering at NIIT University, Neemrana, Rajasthan, India. He is a passionate learner who loves to explore space science and emerging technologies. In the future, he aspires to expand the cybersecurity industries in Bhutan and worldwide.



KAVI ARYA

Professor

IIT Bombay, India

Dr. Kavi Arya is Professor of Computer Science & Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay). He completed his B.Sc.(Hons.) in Computing Science from Imperial College of Science & Technology (UK) and M.Sc.(Hons.)/Ph.D. in Computation from University of Oxford. He worked in various positions in industry before coming to IIT Bombay in 2000. He is empaneled on high-level Govt. committees on IT Advisory Boards in Industry and is

on Governing Council and Academic councils of several universities. At IIT Bombay, Prof. Arya is Principal Investigator of the e-Yantra Project popularising "Project Based Learning" using robotics in engineering colleges.



SONIA BASHIR KABIR

Vice Chair & Governing Council Member
United Nations Technology Bank, Bangladesh

Sonia is the Vice Chair & Governing Council Member of United Nations Technology Bank. She is also the Founder of SBK Tech Ventures, a licensed Venture Capital (VC) Fund and the Founder of SBK Foundation, a not-for-profit licensed Microfinance Institute (MFI) which empowers rural communities with access to technology and digital lending. Educated and trained in Silicon Valley in the United States,

Sonia lived for 20 years in the Valley and worked for Fortune 500 companies Sun Microsystems & Oracle. She relocated to Bangladesh and has served as Director, business development for Microsoft South East Asia New Markets, Country Director for Dell Bangladesh and Managing Director of Microsoft for Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan & Laos.



KAUSHIEK PRANOO

Founder
Unlearning Ashram, India

Kaushiek Pranoo is the founder of Unlearning Ashram, an initiative offering facilitated spaces that empower human transformation towards co-creating a more inclusive, balanced and conscious world. Exploring through the lenses of yoga philosophy, decolonization and holistic unlearning pedagogies, his work is an invitation for people to slow down and closely re-examine every aspect of our lives so that we may recognize, re-imagine and re-design our lives

into a more meaningful, conscious and joyful experience that can transform not just ourselves, but also relationships and help reshape this world. For over a decade, he has facilitated spaces and worked with diverse groups of people and projects across the country around alternative education, youth leadership, wellness, yoga and more.



SHIKHA VATS

An alum of Pallavan Jhalawar, Rajasthan, &
Miranda House,
New Delhi, India

Shikha Vats is a former student of Pallavan School in Jhalawar, Rajasthan. She completed her graduation from Miranda House and is looking to pursue further studies in creative writing. She sees the world through the intersectional feminist lens. She aims to deconstruct patriarchy through her work for an equitable society.

WEBINAR SESSION



Understanding cultural, religious and societal contexts

The webinar began by exploring the ways in which the relationship between Guru and Shishya is imagined in Buddhism compared to the ways it is conceptualised in the Western tradition. It was mentioned that a teacher plays different roles – a teacher who teaches basic concepts and a teacher who teaches the path to Enlightenment. In spirituality, the Guru is considered to be the mentor; he is the guide to the path of Enlightenment and the Buddha is seen as the Guru. That is why the teacher is given so much importance. And the cycle termed as the ‘unbroken lineage’ continues – the student becomes a teacher and so forth. The Guru is regarded as the saviour, and no matter how learned one becomes, the student will still turn to the Guru to show him the path. It was also mentioned that in the Buddhist tradition, there is a lot of emphasis on debate which became challenging after COVID 19 as debates

could not take place face to face which is central to the Buddhist way of teaching.

The discussion then proceeded to the idea of a Guru being invariably, in most historical traditions, framed as a man despite the fact that women have always performed the most basic functions of nurturing and providing emotional and cultural leadership to young people. It was felt that we have been dominated by a patriarchal discourse through the generations and dominated by religious structures as well. In the Hindu tradition, the main godheads have been male while deities are female. It was mentioned that the cause is the socialisation and the dominance of a particular tradition which, of course, now brings into focus the nature vs. nurture debate. Are women inherently born to be female with certain ingrained traditions or can they grow into different roles? And how has that question led to the deification of the female figure? Also, many people refer to the nurturing mother and how the mother is actually the first Guru, which is a conundrum for the traditional Guru Shishya framework. The feminist theory has tried to question these concerns in recent times but we need to be cognizant of the fact that for much of history, all writers were male and all the traditions that were brought down to humanity were from men while women were at the periphery. It was mentioned that as such, there are no insurmountable feminine traits or masculine traits. The mother is the first teacher but that does not mean the feminine is exclusive or that the man cannot have the mothering instinct.

Technology and evolving contexts

The conversation then turned to technology - now that we can access information from a wide variety of technology and media sources, is the idea of Guru redundant or is it so old-fashioned that it is best abandoned? For example, these days, YouTube channels are used as a medium from which various information can be accessed and the evolving shape of the guru is the creator of those YouTube videos.

Most of the panellists felt that this current trend in technology does not make the Guru Shishya relationship redundant. Instead, what we are witnessing is the evolution of the Guru Shishya relationship. Specifically, it is the mode in which we are communicating with the Guru that is evolving. For example, these days, conversations with teachers take place on WhatsApp which is uploaded on a server that can be accessed by the student at a later stage for reference. This would not have been possible in the past and one would have had to wait to ask questions in a classroom. Indeed, with the advancement of technology, the Guru Shishya relationship is constantly being enhanced.

The focus of the conversation continued to be on technology and on project-based learning in particular. It was felt that unless knowledge is put to practical use, it is not absorbed. The typical way that knowledge is imparted in most educational institutions is by rote method where information is memorised and then reproduced during exams; this cannot be termed as learning and the method has to evolve to emphasise on creativity, application and innovation.

In today's times, Shishyas operate at the frontiers of knowledge and the direction that they take may be unknown to the Guru but the Guru can use his past experience to guide the Shishya in the right direction. Therefore, both are advancing their understanding of a certain discipline. The internet has brought about many more options. It has given us access to diverse ways of thinking and introduced us to great thinkers, as esoteric as they may be. Now, we need to realise that technology is simply a tool, as are robotics and AI. These are like sharp knives that you can use to cut various things with; similarly, with technology and AI, you can choose to do good things or bad things. At the end of the day, it boils down to your sense of ethics, fairness, and equity. However, we need to be careful of the fact that AI can become so powerful that we cannot just depend on the morality of the people using AI to use it wisely. There must be some way of controlling the rapid advent of technology because it is increasingly getting more dangerous. This led to the consensus that goodness can

be taught and Gurus have a duty to impart moral training - to teach values that are beneficial and productive.

Plurality of sources and interchangeability of roles

There was general agreement that all of us must look both inwards and outwards for sources of knowledge, that may include our own thoughts and emotions, nature, friends and family, and of course those that play more formal roles as teachers. It was stated that one of the most important Gurus we learn from throughout our lives is the Guru within. One has one's own sense of aesthetics and morality; and that sense of right and wrong helps an individual to find a Guru in the outside world. In the oldest tradition of Indian thought, there has been the concept of debate – *tarp vitarp* – where students were encouraged to put forward their views and to think for themselves.

Many agreed that with the advent of the internet and information technology, the line between Guru and Shishya is increasingly being blurred – a Guru is also a Shishya and a Shishya can be a Guru. In Sanskrit, Guru is referred to as someone who brings you from darkness into light. So the question remains, do YouTubers and social media influencers fulfil this criteria, especially because the entire process is unregulated and unfiltered? Are the so-called social media 'Gurus' giving out information that should not be shared with the learners of today? How should society tackle the problem of misinformation, polarisation and radicalisation, and ensure that the right Gurus are promoted? It was felt that it comes down to the choices of the Shishya and every choice has a consequence. One point of view was that there is neither a good Guru nor a bad Guru because there is something to learn from everyone. When it comes to learning, it is important for each individual to remain open-minded in order to have an enriching learning experience.

The discussion then turned to the existing tension between economic rationality and ethical altruistic rationality and how it relates to the Guru Shishya relationship. Working with start-ups and business corporations, one is constantly learning but the agenda at the end of the day is to make money, grow financially and be successful. On the other hand, working with a not-for-profit foundation entails bringing positive change in society. There are tensions because the former is about making money while the latter is concerned with giving away money. But in both fields, we need to work at two important things to promote a healthy Guru Shishya dynamic – inculcating a sense of curiosity amongst the founders and teaching compassion and empathy.

But the state of the Guru Shishya relationship is not always in a state of conflict or tension. When there is a palpable energy on the part of the Guru to teach and willingness on the part of the Shishya to show her vulnerability, they both open up and create a great bond to learn and connect. Once that deep connection is found, things fall into place seamlessly. This process is particularly important because during the technology transformation that occurred due to Covid 19, there has been a clear paradigm shift in the Guru Shishya relationship. The Guru is not always the older and more knowledgeable person. Gurus can also be younger – a good example is grandchildren teaching their grandparents how to use a smartphone. It is paramount that we understand that Guru Shishya is a very fluid relationship in this day and age, and often a Guru could be learning from a Shishya. Once there is trust and commitment to learn from one another, the tension disappears. It was repeatedly stressed upon that for an equitable society there needs to be a wholistic bond where learning between a Guru and Shishya is a two-way process.

Unlearning and relearning

The focus then shifted to learning and unlearning and understanding the difference between the two. It is first important to understand what is knowledge and how knowledge is created in humans at a very fundamental level. In the pre-internet era, information was considered as knowledge. But now with the advance in technology, information is easily accessible. So, a huge chunk of information-based learning is not dependent on the traditional Guru Shishya relationship anymore. In this context, it is important that we evolve our understanding of how one acquires knowledge and how the Guru Shishya framework comes into play. For example, there is a particular kind of learning today which is largely action-based and focused on experiencing by oneself. A lot of emphasis is on active, activity-based, experiential, hands-on learning. Also, bringing attention and awareness to what we are doing is crucial to acquiring knowledge. At the same time, we need to enhance our consciousness in order to deal with sophisticated technology, and for that, we need to invest in a heightened sense of perception. This is where we need to adhere to the essence of the Guru Shishya relationship, even though the modality and channels of knowledge transfer have evolved. We need to realise that at a fundamental level, a Guru is still someone who goes to the very core of learning and helps in expanding our perception and helps in polishing the instruments by which a Shishya sees the world.

Unlearning is about moving away from a distorted sense of truth to seeing the world for the way it is - from *avidya* to *vidya*. And this aspect of being a Guru does not change. It was felt that one of the roles of the Guru is to help the Shishya realise his own false consciousness. In yogic traditions, there are different kinds of Gurus and not all of them are pleasant – some are pleasant, some hardly speak, some are rude, and observe others learn. A Guru's central role then is to constantly challenge the Shishya and facilitate learning, no matter what the modality or channels are.

Further perspective

The webinar drew to a close with observations from two selected members of the audience, Vidya Shah and Swapan Seth. Vidya Shah brought the discussion full circle by expressing the fact that for many people in the creative industry, such as artists and musicians, the Guru Shishya relationship continues with a consistent and often slavish commitment to the linearity of tradition. She stated that when you are attached to schools of systematic learning, it can be difficult to see the disruptions. This further highlighted the importance of culture and context that might colour the interpretation of the Guru Shishya relationship. Swapan Seth expressed that he did not believe that there is a clear binary between the roles, and especially highlighted the changing authority of age.

Q&A SESSION

Q. Channels of communication between Guru and Shishya are evolving and we have to relook at who exactly is a Guru but is our society which is deeply rooted in culture ready to accept the evolving nature of the Guru Shishya relationship which is no longer uni-dimensional or is it not?

A. The relationship was hierarchical and one-way at one point but that has changed. The change is to be embraced and whether you like it or not it is here to stay. For instance, the effect of the internet can be felt in reducing the distance and increasing the access between the Guru and the Shishya. For example, recently, we trained 30,000 students through an online competition – a massive online course with hardware for over six months. It is very gruelling but we discovered that we were able to train students from the most remote parts of the country and they came up with such innovative solutions to problems that beat the IIT, NIIT students. To me, that is also evidence of the fact that the Guru is within. A teacher teaches basic concepts but to acquire those concepts the students have to do a lot of work. So the student is his own Guru and the teacher just points the way.

Q. How could we work to develop a good Guru Shishya relationship? Technology is creating more distance or gaps between them rather than bringing them together. So how can we use technology in a positive manner to bring the Shishya and Guru relations closer together?

A. Technology should be viewed in a positive manner with the attitude that it augments our knowledge. If you look at it from the lens of accessibility and feedback loop, technology is actually shortening the gap between a teacher and a student. For example, one does not have to wait for a teacher's arrival in the classroom. A message can be sent and the response received within minutes.

Q. There have been human beings like Buddha who did not have another person to help him reach the pinnacle of consciousness. So it cannot be a categorical statement that human beings necessarily need other human beings to learn something or reach enlightenment. What are your thoughts on this?

A. When we talk about us recognising an inner Guru, we are already talking about human beings learning from one another. The first thing to unlearn is that a Guru is a person. A Guru is an aspect or a being and this exists in all aspects of life. One of the most fundamental things that I ask people during breathing exercises is to be with their breath. This can profoundly transform the level of consciousness in people. However, being fully present with something is not what most people know how to do. If you can be with a river, the lake, the ant, or the leaf in the true sense of the word, that can lead to transformation and enlightenment as well. But to open ourselves up is a difficult transition because we are cluttered with too many ideas. That is why, for this transition to occur, it is really helpful to receive support from someone who has already been through the journey.

Q. The Guru Shishya parampara flourished in a time in society where knowledge was controlled by a few. Usually that meant the dominant social community could sustain and necessitate a system of learning and mentoring. However, we now live in an era of greater democratisation of knowledge and access to learning. Should we reconsider what parampara might mean in today's terms? With the interest of democratising knowledge, do we need to completely abandon the older ideas that were curated in a time when few had access to knowledge?

A. I would question the notion of the hierarchy between the teachers and the student, the assumption being that the Guru is the older of the two. I would like to reiterate that we as Gurus can actually be learning from the Shishyas. That is why what is universal is that you have to be open to learning throughout your life. For

example, I have learned recently from a nine-year-old girl. So yes, this whole relationship needs to be explored further and refabricated.

SUMMARY

This 9th Webinar organised by Pallavan Learning Systems, in association with Ritinjali and Centre for Escalation of Peace, explored the ever-evolving nature of the 'Guru Shishya' relationship. The 'Guru Shishya' relationship has undergone significant changes over the course of time. With every major revolution, be it agrarian, industrial, scientific or technological, we are constantly exploring the ever-changing facets of this 'Guru Shishya' relationship. Since the breakout of COVID-19 pandemic, this relationship has experienced many challenges. Learnings from these challenges define a whole new spectrum of knowledge-transfer and understanding. One major shift has been the advent of online platforms and the engagement of learning being primarily online without any in-person interaction between teachers and students.

The webinar was moderated by Dr. Fazal Rizvi and Jai Kapoor. The panel consisted of the following seven speakers: Ven. Geshe Tenzin Damchoe, Prof. Malavika Karlekar, Ugyen Jigme Rangdrel, Dr. Kavi Arya, Sonia Bashir Kabir, Kaushiek Pranoo, and Shikha Vats. The webinar was attended by a total of 162, from various countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and the United States. The audience members had a diverse range of occupations such as analysts, counsellors, doctors, editors, teachers, therapists, writers, and a large number from the field of education. The moderators and panellists engaged in a conversation about the interchangeability of the Guru Shishya relationship and how best learners can create an environment of mutual growth and learning. The hour and a half proved to be far too short for the lively discussion, that included active engagement from the audience and a rigour debate among the panellists.

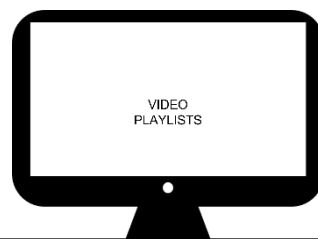
What emerged was the continued importance of this vital relationship, that must remain ever dynamic, and be agile enough to adapt and respond to cultures,

contexts, as well as individual choices. The panel largely agreed that the traditionally hierarchical nature of this relationship (as it has been understood in the Indian and South East Asian context) must change to allow for osmosis and learning between both sides, with the understanding that a true 'Guru' is also always a learner. There was general agreement that all of us must look both inwards and outwards for sources of knowledge, that may include our own thoughts and emotions, nature, friends and family, and of course those that play more formal roles as teachers. The importance of the quality of the relationship, the dimension of vulnerability between the actors, and assumptions about 'Gurus' being conflated with the moral good were discussed.

A large part of the discussion focussed on the need to break down and critically examine all aspects of this relationship, that would benefit from explicit analysis. While acknowledging the danger of essentialising, this examination could address assumptions about the roles being played and by who - such as the impact of a largely patriarchal discourse on society and even religion; assumptions about the learning process and what this includes - such as creativity, criticality, agency, obedience and authority; and assumptions about the end goal such as practical versus esoteric knowledge, morality and truth. By far the largest and most galvanising topic of discussion was the role of technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and robotics – and how these most recent developments may impact and be impacted by the Guru Shishya relationship. With the Covid pandemic acting as a catalyst, the stereotypical and assumed roles of Guru and Shishya were significantly disrupted around the world. In today's complex and transient world, it has become increasingly apparent that there are no clear boundaries between who is a Guru and who is a Shishya. All of us are constantly learning from one another, so much so that we can simultaneously don the roles of both. That is why, perhaps, it makes more sense to move away from the dichotomy of imparter and receiver, and instead focus on the process of learning taking place in a specific context.

The webinar drew to a close with observations from two selected members from the audience, Vidya Shah and Swapan Seth. Vidya Shah brought the discussion full circle by expressing the fact that for many people in the creative industry, such as artists and musicians, the Guru Shishya relationship continues with a consistent and often slavish commitment to the linearity of tradition. She stated that when you are attached to schools of systematic learning, it can be difficult to see the disruptions. This further highlighted the importance of culture and context that might colour the interpretation of the Guru Shishya relationship. Swapan Seth expressed that he did not believe that there is a clear binary between the roles, and especially highlighted the changing authority of age.

The webinar ended with the conclusion that this is a vast topic that requires continued study and debate, and that easy answers are unlikely. We hope that this discussion was as interesting and exciting for the audience as it was for our team and we look forward to seeing you again next time.



To watch the video of this webinar [click here](#)

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