

# The Guru – Disciple Relationship Embedded in The Vedas and Its Relevance to Nep 2020

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**Abstract**—The progress, prosperity and dignity of every individual, society, and nation is fundamentally based on education, and the educational system of a country is shaped by the culture upon which it rests. The general meaning of the term “Shiksha” (education) is the acquisition of knowledge. According to the Vedas, however, education does not merely mean teaching and learning in the classroom. It includes disciplined study, understanding, and proper conduct. Education is not meant solely for earning a livelihood. Its purpose is to enable the individual to develop human values and ultimately attain liberation.

The importance of discipline and faith in the pursuit of knowledge is clearly expressed in the Vedic verse:

व्रतेन दीक्षामाप्नोति दीक्षयाद्भ्योति दक्षिणाम्  
दक्षिणा श्रद्धामाप्नोति श्रद्धया सत्यमाच्यते॥

In the context of modern universities, this ancient educational vision finds renewed relevance through India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. NEP 2020 advocates holistic and multidisciplinary education, ethical grounding, experiential learning, and character development alongside academic excellence. By integrating these principles, modern higher education institutions can move beyond degree-centric learning toward nurturing responsible, ethical, and self-reliant individuals. Thus, the Gurukul model, interpreted through NEP 2020, offers a timeless framework for reimagining contemporary university education rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems while addressing the demands of the modern world.

**Index Terms**—Guru – Shishya tradition, Value-based education, Character formation, Discipline (Vrata), NEP 2020, Multidisciplinary education, Skill – based learning, Life-long learning.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education has always been regarded as the foundation of human development and social progress. In the Indian intellectual tradition, education is not merely a

means of acquiring information but a comprehensive process aimed at the holistic development of an individual. The Vedic system of education placed great emphasis on the harmonious growth of intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social qualities through the sacred Guru–Shishya tradition. In this tradition, the Guru was not only a teacher but also a guide, mentor, and moral exemplar who shaped the character and conduct of the disciple.

The Gurukul system of education, as described in the Vedas and other ancient Indian scriptures, was deeply rooted in discipline, self-restraint, devotion to learning, and the cultivation of ethical values. Students lived under the guidance of the Guru in a peaceful and natural environment, where learning was combined with practical life training, moral instruction, and spiritual discipline. Education in this system aimed at creating responsible, virtuous, and capable individuals who could contribute meaningfully to society and uphold the cultural values of the nation.

In the contemporary educational landscape, the principles of ancient Indian education have gained renewed attention, particularly through India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education, ethical development, research orientation, and experiential learning. These principles resonate strongly with the educational ideals found in the Vedic Gurukul tradition. Therefore, examining the Guru–Shishya relationship and the educational values described in Vedic literature provides valuable insights for reimagining modern university education. By integrating these traditional principles with contemporary academic practices, modern educational institutions can foster not only intellectual excellence but also character formation, social responsibility, and lifelong learning. The Vedas emphasize the utmost

importance of the Guru–disciple relationship. Worship flourishes only when faith arises. For this reason, a celibate student traditionally entered the Gurukul as a disciple. In the Gurukul, within a pure and serene environment, under the close guidance of the Guru, and through the practice of celibacy, moral conduct, and self-study, education was imparted through a practical Guru-based system. This education aimed not merely at acquiring knowledge, but at shaping a complete human being and teaching the art of living, so that the student might become an ideal citizen and an ideal ruler in the future. This was the ancient ideal of education. Through observance of vows (discipline), one attains initiation; through initiation, one becomes eligible for offering Dakshina. Dakshina gives rise to faith, and through faith, one attains the knowledge of truth. At the time of entering the Gurukul, the disciple takes a solemn vow:

*“O Lord Agni! I shall observe the vow according to my capacity. I shall remain disciplined through punctuality, self-restraint, and tolerance.*

During this vow, “I shall follow truth, renounce falsehood, and firmly accept truth.” Thus, vows hold a special and significant place in the process of discipline. Through Gayatri Dikṣa, the Guru guides the disciple along this righteous path of spiritual and moral development.

According to the Rigveda, the principal means of acquiring knowledge were education and the tradition of questioning. These means of attaining knowledge are also mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita. True education is achieved only through humility, inquiry, and service. According to the Yajurveda, a student educated through the Gurukul system becomes beneficial to society. The Acharya shapes the character of the student and stands as an ideal of truthfulness and purity of conduct. Through this process, the culture and civilization of the nation develop.

While explaining the term Guru in the “Andhakarakopanishad”, it is stated that the syllable ‘Gu’ signifies darkness or ignorance, and ‘Ru’ signifies light or knowledge. One who removes the darkness of ignorance through the light of knowledge is called a Guru. The Niruktakaras have also elaborated upon the significance and greatness of the word Guru. According to the scriptures, the Guru is the benefactor of the disciple and the guide on the path of truth. Through teaching and guidance, the Guru

nurtures and brings forth the innate qualities inherent in the disciple, leading to the all-round development of personality.

Finally, it is said:

“गिरति अज्ञानं गुणति उपदिशति वा धर्मं स गुरुः”

That is, one who removes ignorance or imparts the teachings of righteousness is called a Guru.

In the Atharvaveda, the Guru is described as the mental or spiritual father of the disciple. Through the Upanayana sacrament, the Acharya symbolically conceives the celibate student, keeps him for three nights, frees him from impure thoughts, and grants him a second birth. Thereafter, all forms of knowledge become accessible to him. This signifies that only after the intellect is purified and refined through Guru-knowledge under the guidance of various Acharyas does a person attain honor, respect, and prestige in society.

The Vedas accord special importance to the term Rishi. The word Rishi refers to one who perceives the ultimate truth. In Vedic literature, sages are regarded as the very foundation of knowledge, and their qualities are described in detail. The supreme objective of education is to attain proper understanding of: (1) the purity of place, time, and subject; (2) knowledge of the soul; and (3) insight into the relationship between the soul and the Supreme Being. A person who embodies these qualities is recognized as a Rishi.

The attainment of complete knowledge constitutes the second stage of Dvija (twice-born) life. At this stage, the disciple seeks refuge in an Acharya and acquires education through the observance of brahmacharya (celibacy). In the Atharvaveda, the Maharishis portray the Acharya as an ideal embodiment of divine power, knowledge, and moral character. The Acharya is described as an ocean of wisdom who imparts to the disciple an understanding of profound and subtle forces extending from the earth to the heavens.

The Guru serves as the central pillar of the entire educational process and plays a crucial role in shaping the disciple’s personality. His responsibility is not confined to the individual disciple alone but is rooted in a broader social context. By being aware of the challenges faced by society and the nation, the Guru guides the way toward a noble and enlightened path.

The Rigveda expresses this ideal in the following manner:

*“May I find such a Guru who excels in knowledge, action, and wisdom; who is advanced in learning and humility; who possesses sharp and mature experience; who is virtuous in conduct; and who is exceptionally skilled in speech and profound understanding.”*

A traditional proverb further state: “Speech spoken with goodwill, and words uttered slowly and thoughtfully, captivate the mind. People are naturally drawn to such sweet and gentle speech.”

The speech of an Acharya should be refined, emotionally balanced, pure in thought, elevated in ideals, yet simple and inspiring. The relationship between teacher and disciple should be characterized by affection, sweetness, and firm discipline.

The Atharvaveda declares:

“आचार्यः ब्रह्मचारी प्रजापतिः”

Indicating that the teacher should be disciplined, self-controlled, and of exemplary character. Similarly, the Yajurveda states:

“व्रतं प्रजापतिः।”

which signifies that the Acharya should be resolute, radiant, faithful, and deeply devoted to Brahman.

According to Manusmriti, the Guru should embody purity and ideal conduct. A Guru must possess self-restraint, knowledge, experience, and moral integrity. He not only imparts knowledge to the disciple but also provides guidance for living a righteous life. Through his own conduct, the Guru inspires the disciple. Therefore, the Guru himself must be learned, disciplined, and experienced.

In the Rigveda, while describing the qualifications of a disciple, it is stated:

*"The disciple who serves the Guru with devotion and humility, controls his senses, steadies his mind, and observes celibacy, alone attains true knowledge."*

This implies that knowledge should be acquired from the Guru through humility and dedicated service. According to the Vedas, the disciple should serve the Guru wholeheartedly, engage in careful study, and take joy in learning. Studying with devotion, restraint, and discipline leads to superior knowledge, wisdom, and virtues. The disciple should serve the Guru in thought, word, and deed.

A disciple should be obedient, behave respectfully with friends and peers, harmonize knowledge with action, and act accordingly. He should be disciplined, truthful, and conduct himself appropriately in assemblies and society. Principles such as non-violence, kindness, pure and virtuous conduct, respect for teachers and women, gentle and dignified speech, pure food, self-restraint, peace, and disciplined living should be observed. Service and study should be undertaken with diligence, avoiding laziness, and following a pious and structured daily routine. This is the way a disciple should shape his life.

Knowledge cannot be attained without celibacy. Moreover, celibacy is essential to become capable of enjoying worldly life without becoming entangled in it. Therefore, one must first cultivate self-worth by keeping away from worldly distractions; only then can one make proper and meaningful use of them.

Brahmacharya Ashram is an ashram of prolonged discipline and spiritual austerity. In the Atharvaveda, the term Brahmacharya is used in several senses, and the word tapas (penance or austerity) is also frequently employed in Sanskrit literature.

ब्रह्मचर्येण तपसा राजा राष्ट्रं वि रक्षति  
आचार्यो ब्रह्मचर्येण ब्रह्मचारिणमिच्छते॥

This means that through brahmacharya and penance, a king protects his nation. Similarly, an Acharya makes a disciple worthy only through the observance of brahmacharya. By practicing celibacy, the Acharya safeguards and guides his disciples. Brahmacharya does not merely signify remaining unmarried; rather, it denotes the attainment of self-control. Without mastery over the senses, a king cannot properly govern his subjects or administer the nation. Therefore, it is stated:

जितेन्द्रियो हि शक्नोति वशे धारयितुं प्रजाः॥

That is, one who has conquered his senses alone is capable of controlling and guiding others. A person who lacks self-control cannot make his disciples fully Jitendra (self-restrained).

ब्रह्मचर्येण तपसा देवा मृत्युमुपाघ्नतः  
इन्द्रो ह ब्रह्मचर्येण देवेभ्यः स्वरं भरत |

This implies that through brahmacharya and penance, the gods conquered death. Indra too attained the highest position among the gods through the power of celibacy. The underlying meaning is that through

brahmacharya, human beings overcome death that is, they achieve mastery over the senses. Regular observance of brahmacharya in life establishes firm control over the senses. In essence, without brahmacharya, true and lasting happiness or inner joy cannot be attained through mere physical pleasures.

In reality, the life of a brahmachari is a life of penance and discipline. Hence, his residence was traditionally in the secluded forest ashrams of sages and seers. To cultivate moral strength, it is essential to raise a child in an ethnically pure environment. For the preservation of Vedic culture, life was not oriented toward indulgence from early childhood. In the Gurukul system, a brahmachari studied for nearly twenty-five years and lived an ascetic life, remaining detached from sensual pleasures. After engaging in rigorous pursuit of knowledge through disciplined practice, when the student developed the capacity to resist indulgence despite the presence of desire, the Samavartana Sanskara was performed. Thereafter, he entered the Grihastha Ashram with complete preparedness and maturity.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reconceptualizes the role and structure of modern universities by envisioning them as multidisciplinary, research-oriented, and socially responsive institutions. Within this framework, a modern university is not confined to the transmission of discipline-specific knowledge; rather, it functions as an integrated center for learning, innovation, moral development, and holistic human formation. The policy actively promotes the convergence of science, technology, humanities, and social sciences to address complex real-world challenges through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches.

NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on strengthening scientific temper and cultivating a robust research culture within modern universities by encouraging inquiry-based pedagogy, laboratory-oriented instruction, and problem-solving methodologies. Experiential learning, innovation, and critical thinking constitute the core educational strategies, enabling learners to effectively bridge theoretical understanding with practical application. Furthermore, the research and innovation ecosystem are strengthened through flexible curricular structures, enhanced academic autonomy, and sustained collaboration with national and international institutions.

Alongside scientific and technological advancement, NEP 2020 upholds ethical values, social responsibility, and sustainability grounded in Indian knowledge traditions. Central to this vision is the revitalization of the Guru–Shishya (teacher–student) relationship, which emphasizes mentorship, moral guidance, personalized learning, and character formation. By integrating academic excellence with ethical and civic consciousness through a mentor-led educational framework, modern universities are expected to nurture competent, innovative, and globally competitive graduates. Consequently, NEP 2020 positions modern universities as key catalysts for national development, social transformation, and global knowledge leadership.

## II. CONCLUSION

The Vedic educational tradition presents a profound and comprehensive vision of learning that goes beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge. Through the Guru–Shishya relationship, education was understood as a sacred process of character formation, self-discipline, moral development, and spiritual growth. The Gurukul system created an environment where the disciple lived under the direct guidance of the Guru and learned through devotion, humility, inquiry, and service. Such an approach ensured the balanced development of intellect, ethics, and personality, enabling the student to become a responsible member of society.

The teachings of the Vedas emphasize that true knowledge is attained through discipline, faith, and dedication. Concepts such as brahmacharya, self-restraint, truthfulness, and respectful conduct were considered essential components of education. The Guru served as a guiding light who removed the darkness of ignorance and nurtured the latent potential within the disciple. Through this relationship, the values and cultural heritage of the nation were transmitted from one generation to the next.

In the present era, when higher education institutions are striving to address complex global challenges, the educational philosophy reflected in the Vedic tradition offers timeless guidance. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes the importance of holistic learning, ethical awareness, and multidisciplinary approaches, which closely align with the ideals of the Gurukul system. By integrating these

traditional values with modern academic frameworks, universities can cultivate knowledgeable, ethical, innovative, and socially responsible individuals. Thus, the ancient Guru–Shishya tradition continues to hold significant relevance for shaping a balanced and value-oriented educational system in the modern world.

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