Sloka 34 (Chapter 4)

TAD VIDDH PRANIPATENA PARIPRASHHNENA SEVAYA
UPADEKSHYANTI TE’ JNANAM JNANINAS TATVA DARSHINAH

Know that by full prostration, question and service, the sages who have realised the truth will instruct you in that knowledge.

The spiritual seeker/sadhaka is in search of spiritual knowledge. He needs instructions/guidance on the ways to understand “The Truth” and approach “The Truth” properly. He has to approach the “Jnani”. This is the meaning of the statement “Upadekshante te’ jnani-naha.”

Who is such a Jnani? As it is concerning the knowledge of “The Truth”, the instructor has to be one who has himself realised “The Truth”. This is the meaning of the word “Tatvadarshinaha.”

How to approach such an instructor?
“Pranipatena” - By prostration.
“Pariprashnena” - By repeated questioning.
“Sevaya” - By service.

In the Hindu philosophy we use the word “Guru” for the spiritual teacher. “Guru” is he who dispels the darkness known as “ignorance.” Whereas, the teacher we refer to in our daily life gives/assists in knowledge about the material world.

We contribute towards the pay of the teachers who are employees of the teaching institutions. The way to approach the teacher or guru is similar in certain ways and totally different in a number of ways. Humility and a desire to learn are common requirements to approach both the guru and the teacher.

In the olden days, thousands of years ago, the science of the material world was taught by the father to son. There were no teaching institutions like what we are familiar now. As we know in the beginning there were not even the written alphabets with which we are familiar now.

Those belonging to the business and service trades stayed back in the city/town/village of their birth and learnt the trade by observing their father conducting such a trade.

Those belonging to the priestly class and the warrior class needed to go out of their place of birth to a hermitage which was away from the hub of city life. The hermits lived in forests and the place of their residence was known as “ashrama.” The word “ashrama” means “shelter.” For those seekers of spiritual knowledge these hermitages were a place of shelter which provided boarding/lodging and education. The requirements were the need to show the keenness to learn “The Truth” and to be humble. Along with this the student was encouraged to ask repeated genuine questions to clear the doubts. As there were no written books, the students had to depend on memory and understanding what was taught. Only by repeated questioning the guru would understand the doubts and would find ways to help such a student to clear the doubts.

Why the condition of “Pranipatena”? (repeated prostration.)

This method of prostration is known popularly as “Sashtanga Pranama”. It means obeisance to the revered ones. It involves the act of literally falling down at the feet of the mas-
This is a sign of respect. The revered ones are representatives of spreading the dharma on earth. The feet are their organs in moving about and spreading dharma and hence the custom of touching their feet in this show of respect.

This shows the annihilation of ego on the part of the seeker, be he a king/prince/rich member of the society.

This is associated with “Pariprashnena” which means “repeated questioning.”

Repeated prostration and questioning is a sign of humility on the part of the seeker who is requesting the seer to guide him in the path of dharma. Unless the doubts are cleared seeker cannot make progress and the only person to clear the doubts is the seer who is “The Guru”. This is by repeatedly questioning on points that are not clear and requesting for forgiveness in slow uptake of the spiritual knowledge. “I am an ignorant fool and master, please be patient and help me in clearing all my doubts and lead me in the right path,” should be the attitude of the seeker.

The questioning is, let me make it clear only to clear the doubts. It is not the fashion of some of the present institutions where one finds the students bombarding the lecturer (with the information collected from sources like internet). This I believe is more in the form of a show off on the part of the student who wants to display his knowledge and test the teacher’s knowledge in front of the peers.

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